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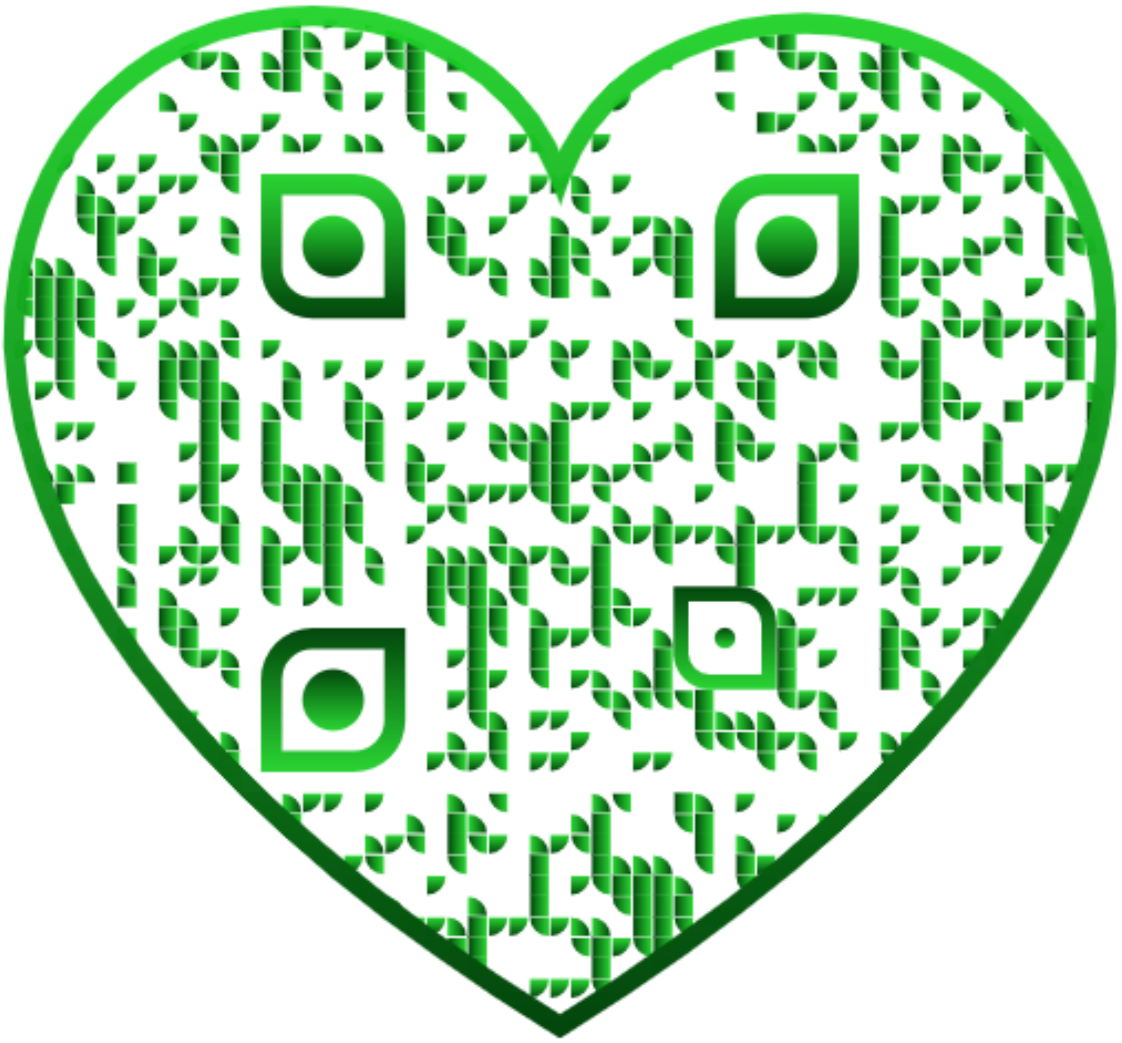
ANKUR TEWARI

On curating Coke Studio Bharat, his new album Akela, and supervising the music for The Archies



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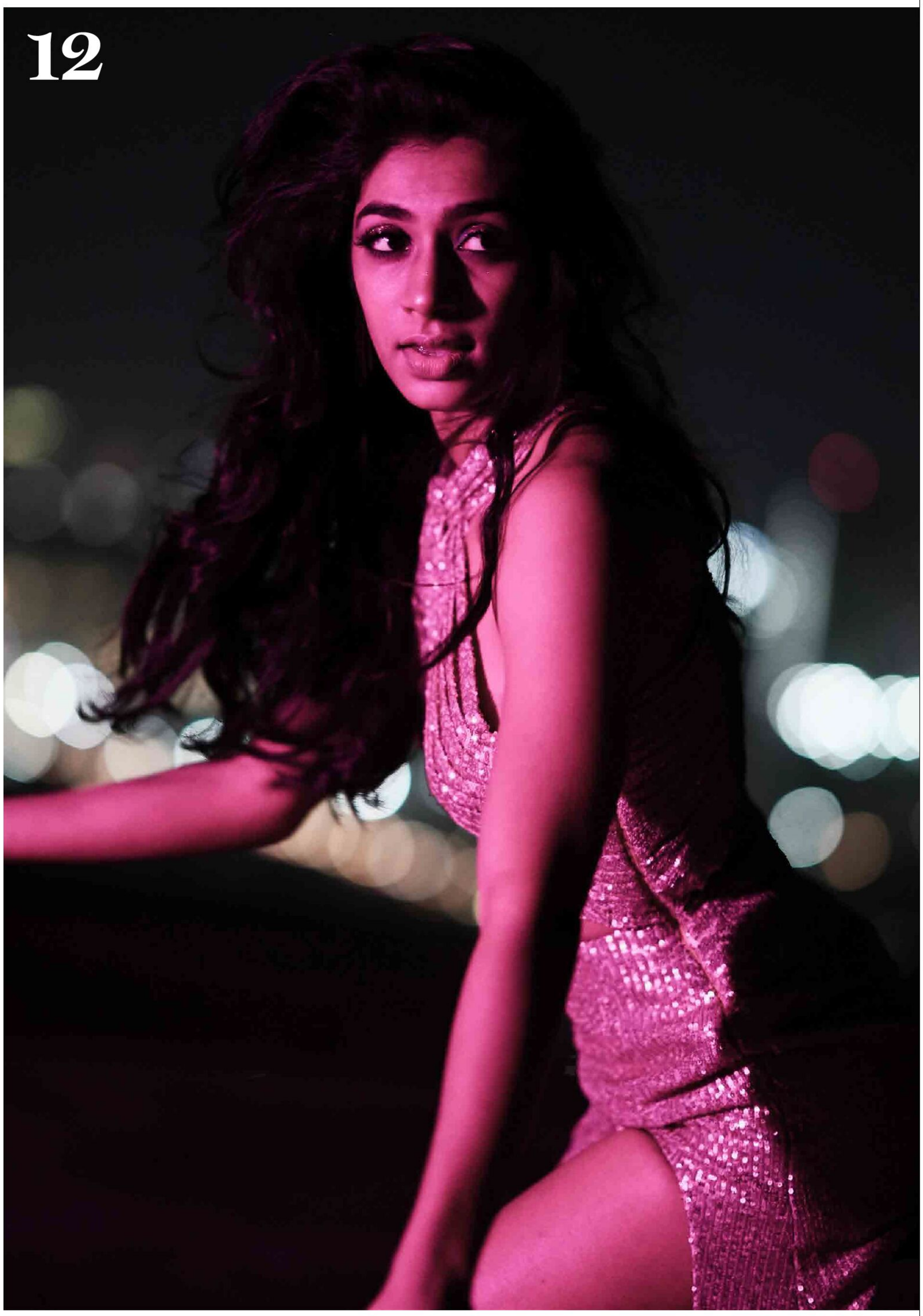

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Content Strategy: **Ruth Mohinani**
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ADVERTISING & SALES

BRAND DIRECTOR — Tulsi Bavishi
MUMBAI tulsi@mansworldindia.com

DEPUTY GENERAL MANAGER — Noha Qadri
MUMBAI noha@mansworldindia.com

GENERAL MANAGER — Manoj Sharma
DELHI manoj@mansworldindia.com

SR. CIRCULATION EXC. (MIS & OPR) — Santosh P. Gajinkar
9969571319

CONTACT:

E-MAIL: editor@rollingstone-india.com,
circulation@rollingstone-india.com

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Khar West, Mumbai, Maharashtra 400052

www.rollingstoneindia.com

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NEW YORK OFFICE

475 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10017
212.213.1900

LOS ANGELES OFFICE

11175 Santa Monica Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90025
310.321.5000

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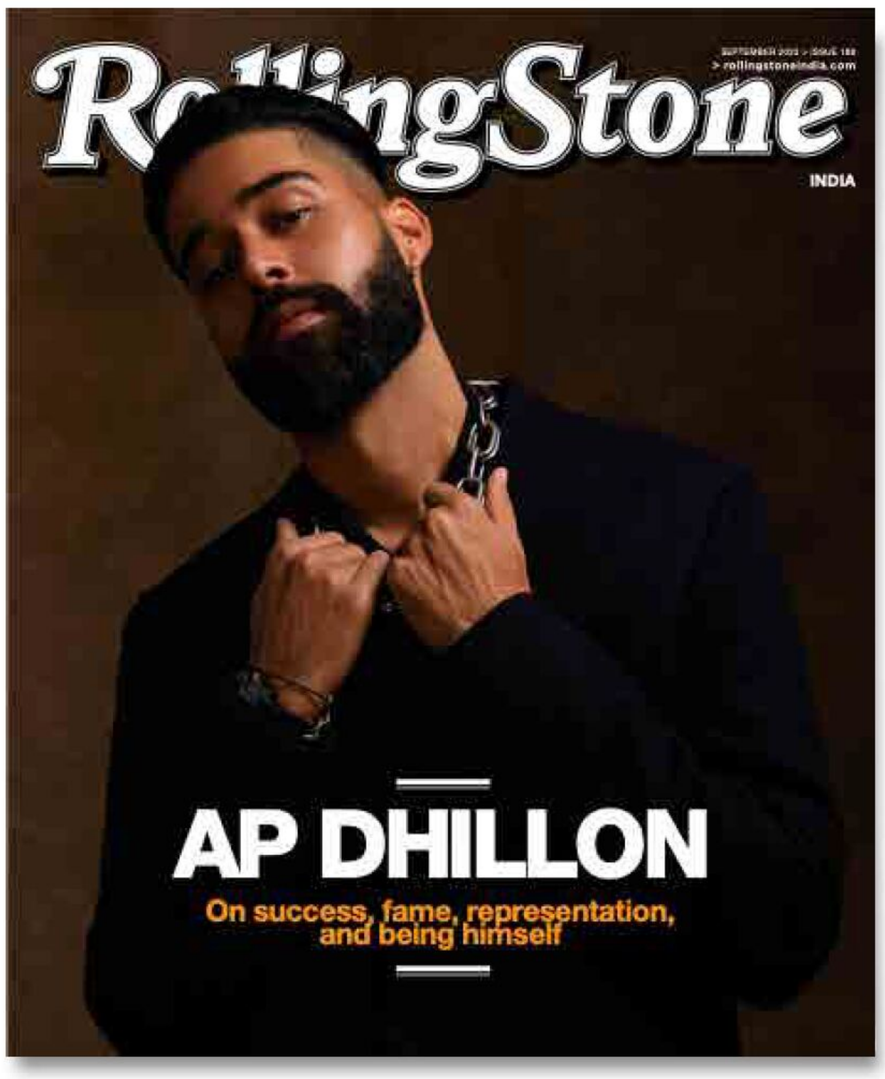

"His [Dhillon's] candid interview reveals not just the artist but the person behind the music."

— Sunil Chauhan

AP Dhillon Appreciation

The cover story on AP Dhillon offers an intimate insight into this rising music sensation. His candid interview reveals not just the artist but the person behind the music. Such stories humanize the industry and make us connect on a personal level, deepening our appreciation for his work.

Sunflower Tape Machine's Simplicity

The acoustic-leaning "Rosemary" by Sunflower Tape Machine is a refreshing musical journey. It beautifully encapsulates the essence of simplicity and emotion. Such ditties remind us of the power of stripped-down music, offering a welcome change in today's digital age.

- Meher Lalwani

Maddy Sharma's Storytelling

Maddy Sharma's poignant singles, "Door" and "Kya Rahoge Tum," resonate deeply with their heartfelt lyrics and soulful melodies. These tracks capture raw emotions and invite introspection. In a world saturated with music, it's artists like Sharma who remind us of the power of authenticity in storytelling.

- Sagar Duggal

SPOTLIGHT

Dolly Parton's Back

Dolly Parton's new album, 'Rockstar,' is a delightful anticipation. As an enduring icon, she continues to redefine her legacy, proving that age is no barrier to creative brilliance. We eagerly await the magic she will undoubtedly weave through her music once again.

- Valencia Alphonso

CONTACT US

LETTERS: ROLLING STONE INDIA,
6th Floor, Shivraj Heights,
Corner of 14th Road, &, Off Linking Rd,
Khar West, Mumbai, Maharashtra 400052
E-MAIL: editor@rollingstone-india.com
Letters/e-mails will be edited for brevity.
SUBSCRIBER SERVICES:
circulation@rollingstone-india.com,
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Opening Act

Here Comes Peso Pluma to Save the Day

WHEN HASSAN EMILIO KABANDE LAIJA puts on his ski mask and gold chains before shows, he transforms into the chart-topping hitmaker Peso Pluma. "The Peter Parker comparisons aren't a joke," he says with a laugh. "I convert myself into that superhero." (The spider-themed visuals during his shows help the fantasy.) The 24-year-old Mexican artist, whose blustery fusion of trap and corridos made him música Mexicana's breakout star, credits his mom with keeping him grounded; he recently flew her to L.A. to cook for him when he was craving her *sopa de fideo, machaca,* and *asado sinaloense. "Está cabrón.* There's no comparison to your mom's food," he adds. "Never, ever." TOMÁS MIER

Getting ready for a show in Inglewood, California, in July

PHOTOGRAPH BY John Rodriguez

The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

Listening to Her Heart

U.K. singer Jorja Smith had to leave London and move back home to reach her full potential

→

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Xavier Scott Marshall

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JORJA SMITH

Jorja smith isn't one to blindly follow her intuition. Sure, her gut has led her to some very good decisions, like the one she made in 2015 to move to London and pursue a career in music shortly after graduating high school. Within just a few years, the British singer and songwriter had star-making guest appearances with Drake and Kendrick Lamar, a coveted spot on the short list for the Mercury Prize, and a Best New Artist nomination at the 2019 Grammy Awards, next to acts like Dua Lipa and Luke Combs. Everything was lining up for her as one of the fastest-rising artists in R&B and pop.

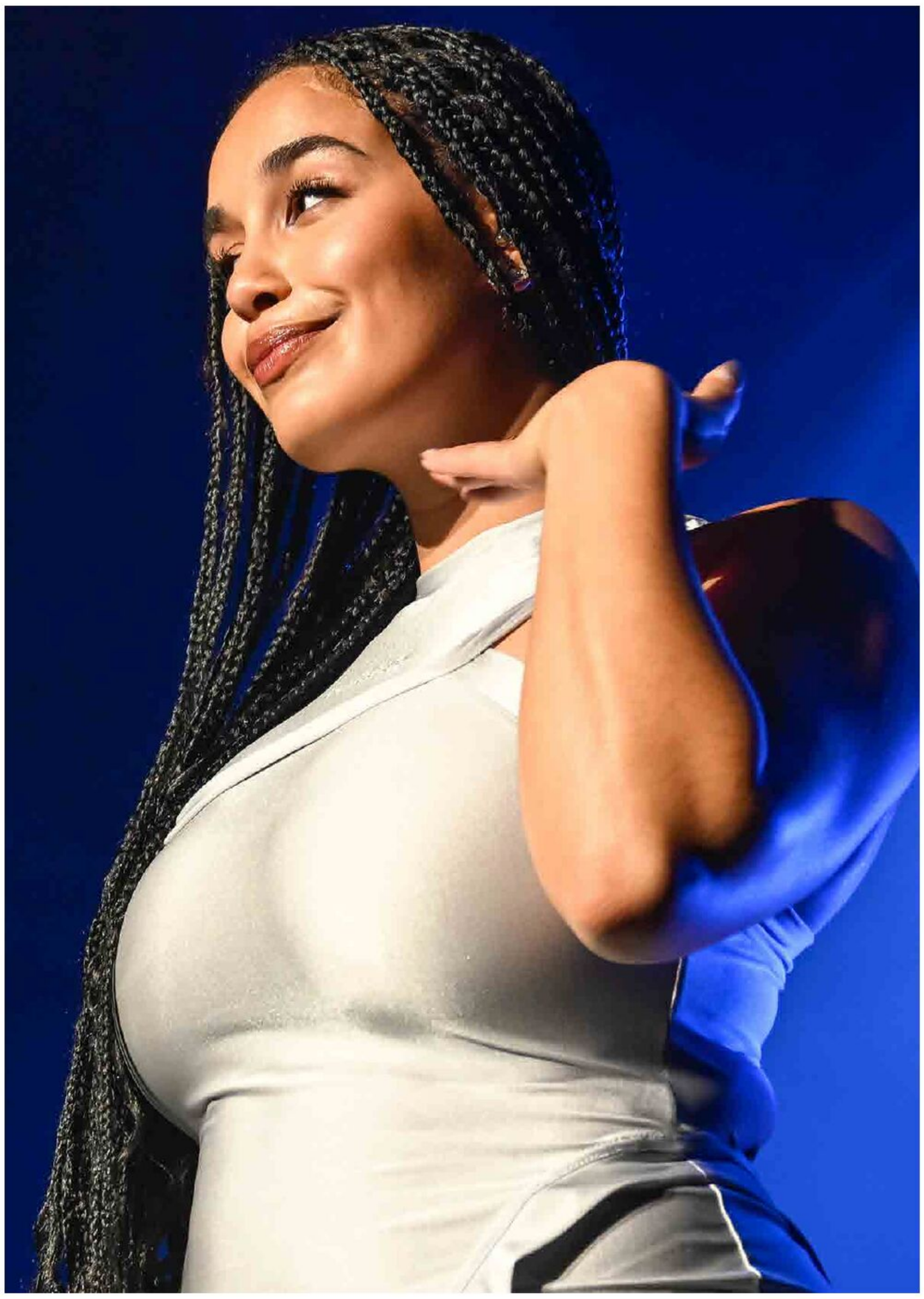
Still, she says, she doubted herself, especially as she began to feel lonely in her new life. "When I put out my first album and then I went on tour, I was never around," Smith, 26, recalls. "I wasn't around family much, I wasn't really around my friends much." She longed for the familiar faces and places of Walsall, England, where she'd grown up. Back in London, Smith would often ask herself: "Why the hell am I here?"

For six years, she pushed that voice away — until 2021, when she finally listened to her gut, headed home to Walsall, and began working on her long-awaited second album, *Falling or Flying,* out now. It's an album that sees her taking a confident leap from a promising new artist to one who's in full command of her sound. "Really, I should just go off how I feel, because my gut feeling is actually always correct and I'll just be ignoring it," she says. "At the end of it, who does it all come down to? Me. And if I'm not happy, then what happens?"

Once she moved back to Walsall, the album began taking shape as Smith reconnected with the production duo DAMEDAME*, one of whose members she has known since she was 15 years old. In them, Smith found a new, intuitive way of tapping into joys that slipped away from her, like her love for playing piano. "There's so many things I stopped doing because I lived in the city," Smith says. "They really got me back into doing what I used to do." Suddenly, the singer wasn't booking studio time and crossing her fingers that something would emerge from a writing session. Most of the time, she says, the three of them were just chopping it up and cracking jokes over food.

She praises DAMEDAME*'s authentic quality: "I feel like they have that naiveté and they have much more of that inner child on the outside," Smith says. She compares that with the music industry in London, "where there's loads of opinions and what people think — they're not there. They don't have that other noise. Everything's just pure."

Smith says she'd never made a project like *Falling or Flying* before, one where she felt no pressure to do anything but be there in the moment. Her 2018 debut, *Lost & Found,* was essentially a compilation of songs she had written over the course of several years; *Be Right Back,* the EP she shared in 2021 to hold fans over while she worked on the new album, was made up of songs from the two years prior.



This time, Smith realized that if she wanted her music to reflect her current state of being, she couldn't dig through old files and find a portal into the future — she had to start from scratch. "I've stepped into being a woman in the making of it," she says. "Loads of songs are talking about other things, and then I'll sing them in the mirror and I'm like, 'Oh, this is about me.'"

On the upbeat, U.K.-garage-infused "Little Things," Smith sings about the rush of a new infatuation; on "Feelings," she shows off an easy chemistry with the British rapper and singer J Hus. But the album's emotional core comes through even more on songs like the brief, heartfelt ballad "Try and Fit In," where she advises someone who's going through burnout, or the acoustic-guitar-backed "Too Many Times," where she addresses the need to break unhealthy cycles in relationships. "Some of them I couldn't write because I hadn't been through what I needed to write about until last year," Smith says.

Smith valued her new collaborative partners' ability to keep her honest as they worked on this album. "J, I think you need to rewrite this one," she remembers DAMEDAME* telling her about one song. "I was like, 'Well, yeah, I do, because I was actually lying.' I needed to rewrite it because what I was writing about, I didn't want someone to hear. So I wrote a completely different song. And then as time passed, I was like, 'Fuck it. I'll write what I mean to say.'"

She also credits some of her creative breakthrough on this album to the three years she has spent consistently attending therapy. "I've just been able to look at myself differently," she says. "That's helped me let go. Honestly, I used to dwell on things or get obsessed with things in my head."

She says her newfound self-knowledge has helped her take more authority over her life and the choices she makes. "What I've noticed in the past, let's say I've said yes to certain things — whether it's a performance or something recorded. In my mind and heart, while I'm saying yes, I'm thinking, 'No, no, no. I know I shouldn't do this.' Then I do it, and all the things I felt when I wanted to say no I still feel." She doesn't get into specifics on those past choices, but it's clear that between therapy and collaborating with people who understand her deeply, Smith has shifted her entire worldview so her own feelings take the lead.

Whereas she might have been haunted in the past by what she should have said in an argument or how she should have stood up for herself, Smith now feels free to follow her musical inspiration. "Being in the studio making songs is the best place in the world," she says. "What people have to say about what I look like and that stuff — that doesn't affect the music. It just affects me, which is shit, but I'll get on with it."

When she's in Walsall, Smith feels untouchable. But she's also learning that her home is wherever she feels most at peace. "Home is just with people that make you feel like yourself. That's when I feel at home," she says, adding with a laugh: "So it can be in London, but I don't want to say that because I don't like London."

The headlining tour she's planning in support of *Falling or Flying* will take her out of her sanctuary, but she now knows she can bring that comfort with her. "That is my other safety bubble, because my crew and band, we're family," Smith adds. "That's like my other home. I feel like I'll just take all my energy that I'm storing here on the road. I always come back here." LARISHA PAUL

FAST FACTS

EARLY ASSIST
Audiences in the U.S. first got to know Smith when she was featured on Drake's 2017 project *More Life,* but it almost didn't happen: She's said she initially turned down Drake's offer to collaborate.

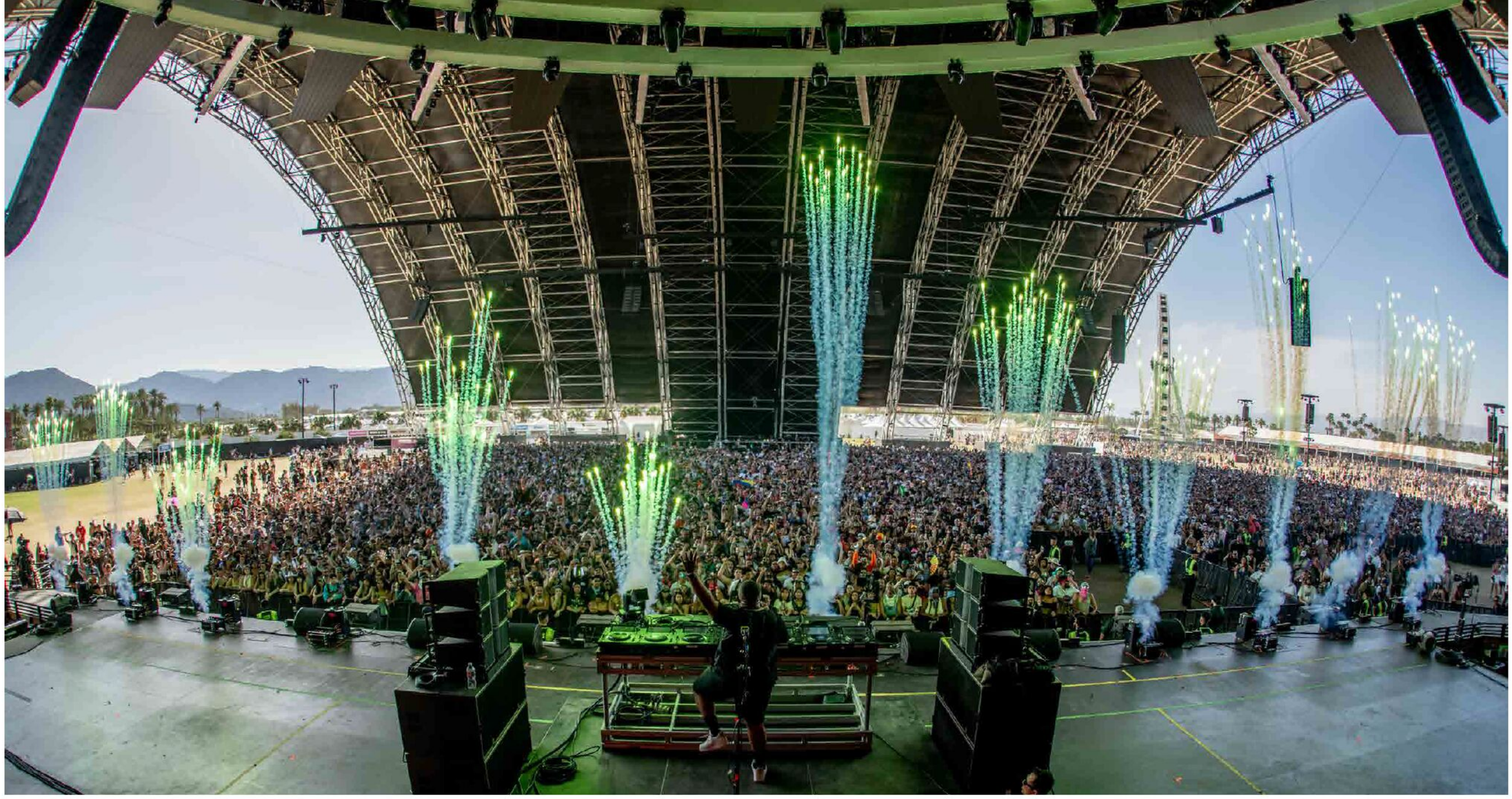
FROM THE START
Growing up in Walsall, Smith learned about music from her Jamaican-born dad, who sang in a neo-soul band. In her teens, she was a major Amy Winehouse fan.

GETTY IMAGES

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Gordo Talks India Memories, New Music and Eight-Hour Sets

The American DJ-producer, previously known as Carnage, recently released "Parcera" with Latin star Maluma and "With You" alongside electronic duo Adriatique



IT'S A SUNNY DAY in New York City as producer-DJ Gordo is seated outdoors at a restaurant and getting sushi. "I'm just living good," Gordo aka Diamanté Anthony Blackmon (fka Carnage) says as he beams a smile over a video call. "I'm gonna go get a haircut."

It was just a week prior to our chat that Gordo was at Tomorrowland, playing an hour-long set that was one for the books, especially because he brought on Latin star Maluma and premiered their then-unreleased song "Parcera." Tomorrowland remains one of the most attended festivals in the world, so it's a sea of people just vibing to Gordo and Maluma gathering their energies. Gordo says he can always the gauge the audience, though. "I've been doing this for a long time. It's hard sometimes because you want to please as many people as possible... it's not easy as it seems. But I think just trusting your gut and doing that stuff is just easiest to do," he adds.

Over the last decade, Gordo's previous moniker Carnage began making waves just as EDM was taking over the world. His releasees were supported by Ultra Music, who continue to put out even his latest singles like the techno-informed "With You" featuring electronic duo Adriatique. There have been many more acclaimed releases along the way, including producing songs from Drake's 2022 album *Honestly, Nevermind* like "Sticky," "Currents," "Massive," "Calling My Name" and "Tie That Binds." It's that kind of appearance that drew the attention of the likes of Maluma to work with Gordo. They got to work in October last year, building on both artists' influence in the Latin music space.

The way Gordo sees it, "every place, every country, every culture has their Drake" and their own "kings and queens" in music. They could be Latin and ruling the American airwaves but the artist brings the point closer to India, mentioning Sidhu Moose Wala and DIVINE. "It's so amazing to see Vivian [DIVINE] shine in India right now," he says. The DJ-producer goes on to namecheck artists like Peso Pluma and Santa Fe Klan, among others being big in North and South America.

"America is one of those places where they've always taken from so many little different cultures and made it their own. Some of the biggest guys playing Latin house music are white kids."

The world over, Latin music has been branching off and the movement is not without appropriators, but Gordo doesn't necessarily see it as a problem. "America is one of those places where they've always taken from so many little different cultures and made it their own. Some of the biggest guys playing Latin house music are white kids. Look at [artist] Hugel, a French guy making Latin house." He adds, "Some people would get upset and some people would just look at it like, 'Okay, well, they're expanding the sound, expanding the audience, and making more people fall in love with our sound.'"

The talk comes around to matters of acceptance, whether it's people accepting newer voices in music and not "feeling insecure" to Gordo's own journey in the music world, moving away from the Carnage moniker. "It just matters where we're loved, and being grateful where we're accepted already. I don't think a lot of people can deal with being rejected so many times. It doesn't stop me from keep going at it. If you'd ask a girl out on a date, and she says no, does that mean you're gonna stop asking girls out on dates?" he says and bursts into a laugh.

One of Gordo's wildest ideas, undoubtedly his USP when it comes to being accepted as DJ-producer across the world, are his eight-hour sets. He's quick to point out how psytrance artists like Goa Gill have been doing it forever and expresses surprise when told he's not from the subcontinent. "I thought he was just like some like legendary guy who lives, like, in the middle of Bangladesh somewhere and just lives on a Goa beach in the summer and takes LSD every day for breakfast. I don't know," he says.

Gordo's own approach is to just download a bunch of music and take the stage. What's running through his mind during an eight-hour set? Just typical Gordo thoughts. "How many girls are on stage? What drinks do we have on stage to get out to the girls? If there's any towels nearby?" the artist says and then pauses for a while. He adds, "How many more girls can we fit on the stage? That's pretty much it." The sets are one of his biggest draws, as are Gordo's Taraka series of shows across the world. Interestingly, Taraka has several meanings in Sanskrit.

The artist then begins talking about India. "I think it's going back into that zone where India will have that explosion like it did in 2014-16 with EDM. I hope I'm invited to that explosion," he says. From playing Sunburn tour shows as Carnage and the one time his show in Pune was moved indoors due to "political stuff." He adds, "India's always been fun. I want to make a Bollywood movie about my life there."

Until that comes out, there's an album coming out. "What really sucks is that me and Sidhu Moose Wala were working on a collab before he sadly passed. But I'm definitely going to do something with somebody in India for sure, on a big scale," Gordo adds. **ANURAG TAGAT**

Priyanka Nath Glams Up In 'Reckless' Video

The song is the Hyderabad-based singer-songwriter's first release of 2023

AFTER RELEASING FOUR SINGLES last year, Hyderabad-based singer-songwriter Priyanka Nath is now out with a brand new offering this year in the shape of the soulful pop number "Reckless." The song is also accompanied by a glittering music video and in this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Nath talks to us about putting the clip together, how the song came about, future plans and more. Read below.

When did you write "Reckless"?
'Reckless' began writing itself in July 2020. During the lockdown period, I began contemplating all the things gone by; I put myself in imaginary situations and even delved into an introspective mode within the quietness of four walls and went on to write 'Reckless.'

What can you tell me about the song itself?
I had been through a very new experience in life. And being an amateur in that sense, I did not know what I was getting myself into. But the good feeling kept me going back to it. Over the years I have realized that going back to that good feeling may be rewarding immediately, but unhealthy in the longer run. I remember having this talk with my friend where he said to me to quit it before it would start hurting me. But I didn't. I was being reckless with my decisions and had shut my ears to all things practical. Until I ended up being what my friend saw coming;

hurt. I jotted a few lines down when all was fresh. The lyrics do boast of self-introspection and realizations from one's past. Writing

The feel of the song was in tandem with the introspective outlook of the lyrics: cool, not remorseful or happy, but being in a sort of a middle ground. It's ambient and spacey to a point where it feels like your mind could be floating in a bunch of clouds while listening to it. The trap-like beats and ambient sounds capture the flowy way the lyrics had been written and also my mood; slightly perplexed while being in a state of calm.

What was the recording and production process like for the song?

'Reckless' had been in the production stage for a hot minute starting in early 2022. It was different from anything I'd written before that so during the recording process, it did take a few tries to warm my voice to its flow and get the pronunciations right. (Hyderabad singer-songwriter) Sidharth Bendi provided his backing vocals in the bridge of the song and I feel like the voice of a male singer complimented the harmonies extremely well.

My producer Kaali deserves all the credit for elevating 'Reckless' with his music. Not only did he capture the essence of the song, but with his dark yet ambient-trap sound, he did complete justice to the feelings that birthed 'Reckless.' Pritpal Sudan has been essential in delivering a clean mix and master. I remember when I heard the first demo in early 2022, I instantly knew that this song was going to mark a new phase for me.

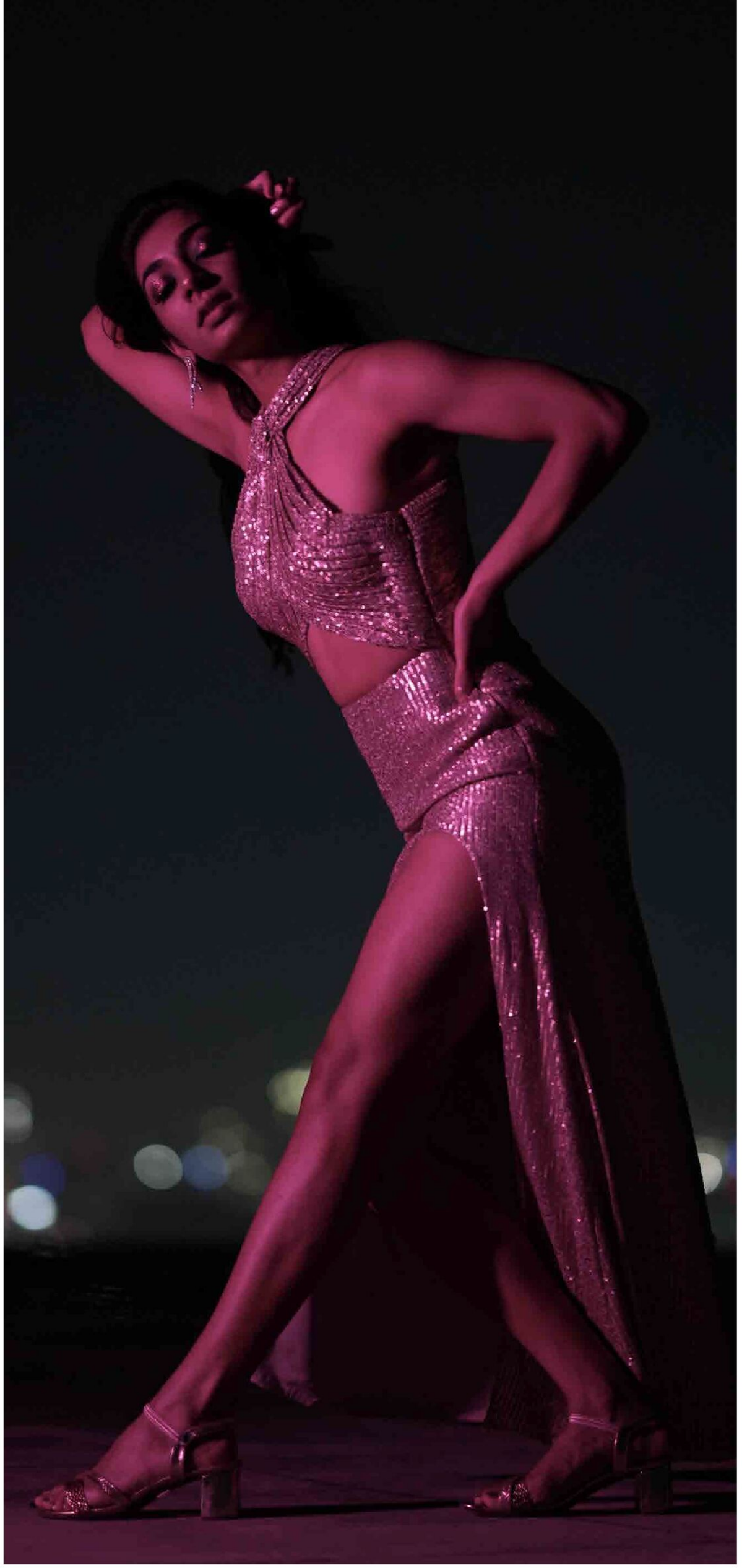
Tell me about the video and your experience putting it together.

This was one hell of an experience, professionally and personally. In March 2022, I wrote the initial draft of the music video script. What surprised me the most during this process was that during desperate times, when I had to reach out to random folks on Instagram, say, for a swimming pool or a projector, people really came through! The shoot officially began in September 2022, and in total, we had about five or six days of shoot. It was my first time shooting with a professional RED camera and only now have I realized the effort and time that goes into shooting even one shot with big equipment. There were parts where we had to sing the lyrics at twice the speed just so that the output could be in slow motion! The swimming pool sequence had to be the most challenging for me. I got a custom-made outfit for the shoot, shot on a helipad and the idea was to majorly have a lot of glam in the video and choreography. Having been a dancer since the age of 6, I had only known dance and music and being on stage; I felt a compulsion as a performer to showcase this to my audience. The entire process of selecting a male actor was fun but time-consuming. It took us a while before we finally landed on Kayvee (Hyderabad-based DJ). I was very happy because I remember being extremely particular about how my male co-actor would look on-screen. Kayvee definitely did justice to his role.

Personally, the journey taught me a lot of patience. I had to learn how to handle very new and challenging situations, and even my feelings because things wouldn't always go the way we'd planned. This music video has been partially funded through a crowdfunding campaign, all thanks to the team of Original Dog.

What's next?

Potentially the darkest song I have written so far. I can't wait for my audience to witness the next release on streaming platforms and live. With 'Reckless,' I gave you a glimpse of what I intend to bring on stage as an artist, especially with my 'Exclusive Dance Performance Video.' I hope to take this live soon and truly start unfolding what I as an artist stand for and am capable of. **DAVID BRITTO**



"It was my first time shooting with a professional RED camera and only now have I realized the effort and time that goes into shooting even one shot with big equipment."

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Mohit Mukhi Releases New Up-Tempo Song 'So If You're Gone?'

The song is the Mumbai-based singer-songwriter's first since last year's 'Find You There'

AFTER RELEASING his assertive single "Find You There" last year, Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Mohit Mukhi spent more time playing gigs rather than writing new music. He says, "It's been a concentrated effort to juggle both, play gigs and better my skill set." Now, the musician is out with a fresh new track in the shape of the glitzy "So If You're Gone?"

Mukhi informs us that hanging out by himself on his terrace at night turned into a good exercise for his songwriting. It was on one of these nights that the chorus for "So If You're Gone?" came about and he says, "The idea got me quite excited, and the verses and the rest of the song naturally followed." On what he's trying to convey through the track's lyrics, Mukhi says, "Some stories never resolve. 'So If You're Gone?' captures the unease in the wake of unresolved love. The lyrics talk about spaces that are tinged with absence."

He adds, "But the mind refuses to fill them up or forget. The songwriting captures the movement of reminding the heart that they are truly gone when they have left and crushing the hope it builds up every time."

Sonically, the track is quite a fresh approach by Mukhi and a departure from his previous somber and melancholic sound. "So If You're Gone?" has a sort of funk touch to it and includes bright instrumentation, a moody yet exhilarating guitar solo as well as Mukhi's timber vocals. The singer-songwriter says, "You know that feeling when a song hurts and heals at the same time? Writing and recording this song did that for me. It was quite a journey."

With a music video also out for "So If You're Gone?" Mukhi is now keen to go back to working on albums and is planning to release an EP next year. He says, "Making an album is truly a very wholesome experience and it's been three years since I did one." DAVID BRITTO

PRASHIN JAGGER

Sai Vsr Releases Rustic New Single 'Mi Amor'

The track is the Hyderabad singer-songwriter's first in over a year

With two singles out last year, Hyderabad-based singer-songwriter Sai Vsr is now back with a new release in the shape of the acoustic-leaning poignant track "Mi Amor." Vsr penned the track in April last year after stumbling across an alternate tuning for his guitar. He says, "I was struggling for weeks to write some lyrics to it. One day, I just woke up from a nap, went to the mic, and started playing this, and the words kind of just came into existence."

According to Vsr, the track revolves around the Spanish phrase "espero que estes bien mi amor" which the singer-songwriter says means, "I hope you're okay, my love." The musician was keen on highlighting the stomach-churning feelings one goes through following a lost love. He says, "I wanted to showcase the need to check in on them and see if they're okay, to let them know you're feeling broken, or even the fact that you understand that you will eventually be replaced by someone else."

"Mi Amor" opens with a beautifully plucked acoustic guitar part and Vsr's lush vocals that set the tone for the rest of the song. As the track builds, keys, strummed guitars and a marching band drum groove enter the fray. The song is filled with plenty of dynamics and climaxes with a big build-up where the drums open and an electric guitar melody is heard as Vsr's elegant voice closes the track.

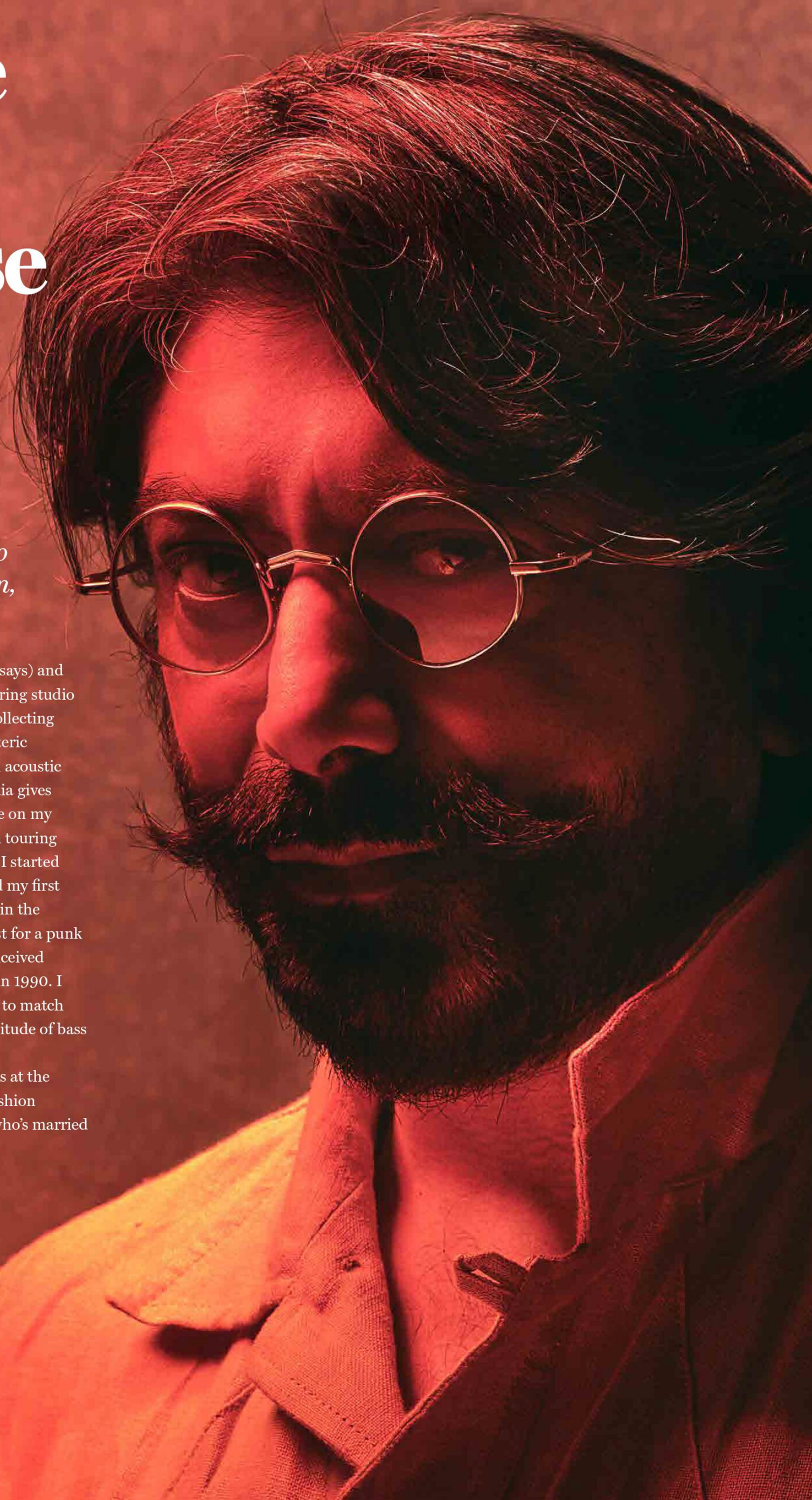
The demo vocals the singer-songwriter recorded when he wrote the song also ended up becoming the final vocal parts heard on the record. He says, "They were just that good and we didn't want to mess with the vibe." Vsr worked out of his home studio and also called upon producer Pritpal Sudan to help him flesh out the track. Sudan even mixed and mastered the song. Vsr says, "Even though most of the production process was virtual, we ended up getting the exact sound that we wanted."

The singer-songwriter is currently keeping himself busy pitching to play as many gigs as he can and also plans to expand his sound and work with more producers and musicians. There's also a couple of songs ready and written that he wants to begin production on. He says, "[I want to] try writing for an artist in the scene that I really like, and eventually try to produce my own stuff too." DAVID BRITTO

SIDHARTH BENDI

Talvin Singh Sets Up Base in Delhi, Set to Release New Album in 2024

The veteran tabla artist and producer/experimentalist's first full-length in about two decades will feature vocalists including Papon, Hamsika Iyer, Vasundhara Vee and more



IT'S NOT ACCURATE TO say that British artist Talvin Singh ever left India, even though the tabla artist and producer was away during the last few years due to the pandemic. Singh tells *Rolling Stone India* over an interview from London that he's been visiting New Delhi not just to study the sitar-adjacent instrument surbahar from his guru, but also to set up his new studio and prep to release his first album in nearly 20 years. "India today has the most diverse artistic talent and buzzing youth culture. This has been inspiring me and my music," Singh says.

Singh is a busy man – he's bringing his instruments down and having master luthiers work on maintenance in New Delhi and Vadodara, he's sitting down face to face with musicians ("I found lockdown static," he says) and has plans to set up a mastering studio in Mumbai, all the while collecting more "analog gear and esoteric electronic as well as Indian acoustic instruments." He says, "India gives me the zeal and perspective on my music today, as I have been touring since a very early age! [...] I started touring at the age of 16 and my first real tour was Lollapalooza in the States, I was a percussionist for a punk band and that's when I conceived my Tablatronics [project] in 1990. I needed the tabla amplified to match the high decibels and amplitude of bass amps and guitar amps."

Fresh from performances at the South Bank Centre with fashion designer Nicholas Daley (who's married

"India gives me the zeal and perspective on my music today."

to DJ-producer Nabihah Iqbal) and U.K. musicians Lucinda Chua and Coby Sey – called Woven Rhythms – Singh's NMACC shows mark the world premiere of his ensemble. Comprising drummer Dhir Mody, sarangi artist Dilshad Khan, flautist Shriram Sampat, producer Premik Jolly and vocalist Hamsika Iyer, the group will perform material from Singh's upcoming album, slated for release in March 2024. Spread across two days on September 30th and October 1st at the Studio Theatre, Singh kicked off traditional sarangi-tabla concert, followed by new album material and "Asian Underground classics" including songs from his seminal albums OK and Ha.

There are three singles releasing this year from the new album and Singh says that the years of not publishing music has "gifted" him with a vault full of unreleased tracks. Among the reasons for the long pause between albums is Singh's disinterest in releasing music in a more digital format, "without sleeves." He adds, "I have always had an audiophile assent to my productions and that's what's ignored in the world of the recording industry."

Nevertheless, the album "touches deep into diasporic roots" for Singh, as well as London's bass culture, along with an emphasis on breakbeats, sound design and of course, Asian Underground. He adds, "It has taken my years to come to a realization that African music has deep resonance in my soul as well as Indian music. My father spent his early days in East Africa with my grandparents and I heard more stories about life in East Africa than I got to hear stories of Punjab." Vocalist Hamsika Iyer – who sang for the tabla artist-producer's soundtrack to 2018 film Once Again – features on the album, as does Assamese star Papon. "Vasundhara Vee is on a song which I have kept very close in my heart and soul. I feel nothing but gratitude to have all these amazing vocalists and musicians participating with their graceful gifts in music," Singh says.

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Ahead of two performances at the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre (NMACC) in Mumbai, Singh is a busy man – he's bringing his instruments down and having master luthiers work on maintenance in New Delhi and Vadodara, he's sitting down face to face with musicians ("I found lockdown static," he says) and has plans to set up a mastering studio in Mumbai, all the while collecting more "analog gear and esoteric electronic as well as Indian acoustic instruments." He says, "India gives me the zeal and perspective on my music today, as I have been touring since a very early age! [...] I started touring at the age of 16 and my first real tour was Lollapalooza in the States, I was a percussionist for a punk band and that's when I conceived my Tablatronics [project] in 1990. I needed the tabla amplified to match the high decibels and amplitude of bass amps and guitar amps."

Also See 10 Manhwa Series That Can be Turned into Excellent K-Dramas

Fresh from performances at the South Bank Centre with fashion designer Nicholas Daley (who's married to DJ-producer Nabihah Iqbal) and U.K. musicians Lucinda Chua and Coby Sey – called Woven Rhythms – Singh says his NMACC shows will mark the world premiere of his ensemble. Comprising drummer Dhir Mody, sarangi artist Dilshad Khan, flautist Shriram Sampat, producer Premik Jolly and vocalist Hamsika Iyer, the group will perform material from Singh's upcoming album, slated for release in March 2024. Spread across two days on September 30th and October 1st at the Studio Theatre, Singh says there will be a traditional sarangi-tabla concert to kick off, followed by new album material and "Asian Underground classics" including songs from his seminal albums OK and Ha.

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COLSTON JULIAN

Salt Rock Return with Soaring New Single 'For You'

The track is the New Delhi band's first piece of new music in three years

After releasing their boisterous single "Anarchy" in 2020, New Delhi outfit Salt Rock are now out with a brand new track in the shape of the gritty yet melodic "For You." In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, the band talks to us about the new song, their recording process, future plans and more. Read below.

What has the band been up to since you released "Anarchy"?

Aditi Sharma (Vocalist): There have been some changes from the initial lineup of the band and we have recently had Vishrut (Shankar Shukla, bassist) join in as the newest Salt Rock member. After our debut release in 2020, we received an amazing response but it was hard to navigate our way through the independent music scene especially since all of us were involved in different projects and live bands just to make ends meet. But I believe this hiatus has given us the time to refocus and work on our artist identity, building a community of rock lovers and writing and recording a lot of songs. We are all ready to make a comeback this time, you can expect nothing short of consistency, creativity and innovation this time around.

Sarthak Pradhan (Drummer): With the volume of releases coming out every day and new movements in music, we quickly understood that the only way to break through the noise will be to come up with a fresh sound and an unshakable identity. The only logical next step was to find a cause and attach ourselves to it. So here we are, after a three-year grind of troubleshooting songwriting methods, recording techniques, production ideas and finding our way through our instruments. Our aim is to reintroduce modern-age rock which resonates with sub-cultural and broader youth movements. It's really all about creating a community now.

What can you tell us about the new song "For You"?

Mayank Lawrence (Guitarist): 'For You' is a special one for us. It's different from anything we've done before. It almost has this inbuilt anxiety, longing and temptation built into its sound. It's a song that's a mix of different things you might not expect. It started as a bluesy idea, but then Aditi added a catchy melody that gave it a pop-rock feel. This song seamlessly switches between raw power and soothing melodies, striking a perfect balance of old and new, strong and soft, and it has both nice tunes and a bit of edge. The words and the melody fit perfectly with the music, and we made sure not to change it too much so it still feels real. It's like rock music, but with a new and exciting touch.

Sharma: Writing the song was really an emotional experience for me. The song revolves around unrequited love and attention — something all of us have been through but are almost embarrassed to address. I wanted to write a song that describes the initial rush of having a crush, the constant hope that those feelings are reciprocated. 'For You' is a playful, flirty and hopeful declaration of love. It expresses the desire to have the person want you as much as you want them.

What was the recording and production process like for the song?

Vishrut Shankar Shukla (Bassist): Being in the studio is where the band truly comes alive. It's where we are most focused, most creative and truly creating — it's almost like meditation but much more chaotic. There's so much creative input happening every second. The studio is where all of these ideas that we've spent months fleshing out are put to print in a way. Because these songs are ingrained in us now, we went in really focused, with a clear idea of how the song is supposed to sound. That said, once you're in the room and the project is in front of you and there are all of these ideas in your head, like a, 'Hey, that sounds nice, we can add that' or a 'Maybe try and play that bit somewhere else,' some of them end up making it on the songs. So it's this extremely creative space and the experience is spearheaded by the fact that we're clear about what we want, and yet there's space to improvise, which honestly makes for a really fun time.

Pradhan: We've all known each other for a long time so it's always a blast recording together. It's something we look forward to every time. For this song in particular, it was a really special experience for us getting back in the studio after years. The song is very different from what we usually create. I think all of us used our past heartache and experiences to really bring this song to life. We have some really interesting behind-the-scenes content in store for our audience, you get to see our goofy side.

What's next?

It's the new era of Salt Rock. We are edgier, more enthusiastic and all about our fans. We really want to shift our focus to storytelling and building a narrative around our music releases. You can expect more singles, tours, exciting content and an album drop from us very soon. DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Kim Tae-ri's 'Jeong Nyeon' Will Revive the Forgotten Story of Gukgeuk Artists

A woman-dominated narrative of aspirations, passion, affirmation, concurrence, and love—most significantly, illuminating an invaluable Korean cultural treasure that has lain dormant for decades

JEONG NYEON STICKS out a mile for two reasons: first, it features a diverse cast; second, it is an unusual period piece that serves as an ode to a fascinating moment in Korean entertainment history—it explores the story of a forgotten genre in Korean art and its performers—the Gukgeuk artists. Primarily put on by women, their acts infused pansori (Korean musical storytelling by a singer and a drummer), dance, and acting, which sparked an uprising in Korea during the 1940s, reaching a peak in the 1950s.

In a Seoul National University Journal post, the women took on both male and female roles to criticize a patriarchal culture, and they were all the rage at the time. Particularly, the females who portrayed male leads enjoyed massive popularity. They'd get fan notes scribbled in blood. One of them, the late actor Jo Geum-aeng, who had the lead male character, even staged a virtual wedding while acting as the groom at the request of a fan who wanted a wedding photograph with her. The documentary *The Girl Princes* (2013) includes details of this obsession, and the enormity of these female stars, together with their contemporary narratives and memories.

They sort of fabricated a fantasy world where love was expressed via exquisite stagecraft, music, and dance, dissolving distinctions between gender and sexuality. The passionate and heroic characters they created frequently won over female viewers, as the perceptive piece adds, and witnessing female actors who "could become anything" gave them a sense of empowerment during the post-liberation transitional period. Their displays had that sort of draw; in fact, some girls eloped to join Gukgeuk companies. Jeong-nyeon, alluded to here, is one such character.

Korean superstar Kim Tae-ri will play the titular Yoon Jeong-nyeon in the Jung Ji-in-directed K-drama, which boasts a host of other notable actors, including Moon So-ri, Ra Mi-ran, and Shin Ye-eun.

A live-action version of Seo Yi-re and Na Mon's popular Naver Webtoon series *Jeong Nyeon*, dubbed "*Jeongnyeoni*," with the same title, is in the works. The distinguished Korean superstar Kim Tae-ri will star as the titular Yoon Jeong-nyeon in the Jung Ji-in-directed K-drama, which boasts a host of other notable actors, including Moon So-ri, Ra Mi-ran, and Shin Ye-eun.

The drama rolls in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War (the 1950s), when Jeong-nyeon and her mother, Seo Yong-rye (Moon), are making a meager livelihood out of Mokpo. Her ideal scenario comprises relocating to Seoul and working as an actor with a Gukguek theater group for fame and fortune. One day in Mokpo, the Kang So-bok (Ra)-led Maeran Woman's Gukguek Theater Company presents a play that fires up Jeong-nyeon's dream. She surreptitiously enters their luggage compartment and shortly enrolls in Seoul as a trainee. Later, there, she meets fellow trainee Heo Young-Seo (Shin) and with time, Jeong-nyeon and Young-seo evolve into adversaries.

Essentially a woman-dominated narrative of aspirations, passion, affirmation, feelings, concurrence, love, and, I'm hoping, a ton of music, it will most significantly illuminate an invaluable Korean cultural treasure that has lain dormant for decades. Feats like those from the Gukgeuk troupes have fallen out of favor since the 1960s as an effect of the huge proliferation of art and artistic outlets brought on by cinema and television. Likewise, cultural demands, like marriage, motherhood, and plenty of other variables, all led to its eventual decline. Even so, thanks to the makers of *Jyeong Nyeon* for reviving their story and spreading the word. The drama is scheduled to debut next year.

DEBASHREE DUTTA

PHOTO COURTESY OF TVN

The featured image includes the production crew and actors of *A Diary of Woman*.

'A Diary of Woman': The First Korean Color Film

Seen as a pivotal moment in Korean cinema's technological evolution, its director, Hong Seong-gi, allegedly assembled technicians for the production in a milieu where filmmaking experts were rare

If you skim my stories, you know Korean cinema can get me to a fever pitch thanks to its genius. That said, besides sampling a wider variety of Korean films, I'm raring to go about things, yes, with bells on, to learn more about their past, and in a bid, I'd often be trawling Korean movie archives. This post follows suit; it's about Hong Seong-gi's 1949 16mm *A Diary of Woman*, the first Korean color film to premiere in Korean cinema following independence. I assume that if you're also into Korean cinema or a film fan in general, this should be an interesting read.

A Diary of Woman, which documents the *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*, premiered on April 9, 1949, at the Sudo Theater or Scala Theater in Seoul. Seen as a pivotal moment in Korean cinema's technological evolution, it should've occurred like an epiphany, for director Hong, then 25, allegedly assembled technicians for the production in a milieu where filmmaking experts were few—rare, for that matter.

The real account of Hwang On-sun's life in the film has Ju Jeung-ryu's Oh-sun in love with her friend's elder brother (Song Jae-ro); she gets duped into marrying him and is aghast upon learning he's already married. A devastated Oh-sun opts for renunciation to focus on humanitarian work by opening a daycare facility. The time made it hard for her to do so, yet an unyielding drive surmounted all odds, and she inevitably flourished in the business. Following the Korean War, she set up an orphanage, earning the reputation of "mother of war orphans" by enrolling war orphans at the Jeju Agricultural High School. Also, she built a relief base at Seoul Station right as the country was freed to serve those discharged from Japanese enlistment.

Newsis, a Korean website, reports: Notwithstanding the post-war disarray, *A Diary of Woman* amassed an avid following, drawing gobs of spectators! Its intensity was true to societal senses and, more specifically, rang with the emotions of female audiences at the time. Sadly, the screening period was short—just one week—and it's figured that's because the colors weren't properly reproduced. The colors were noticeably unclear when it was magnified for cinema viewing, as opposed to when it was assessed in a small version. As per a post in The Chosun Ilbo, it was shot on Kodachrome, a reversal film (slide film), but the processing was subpar, rendering it unable to recreate rich colors and leaving the capture unfinished. Still, the movie's brief run wasn't detrimental to its appeal. 50,000 viewers dropped in to watch it, an impressive figure at the time.

DEBASHREE DUTTA

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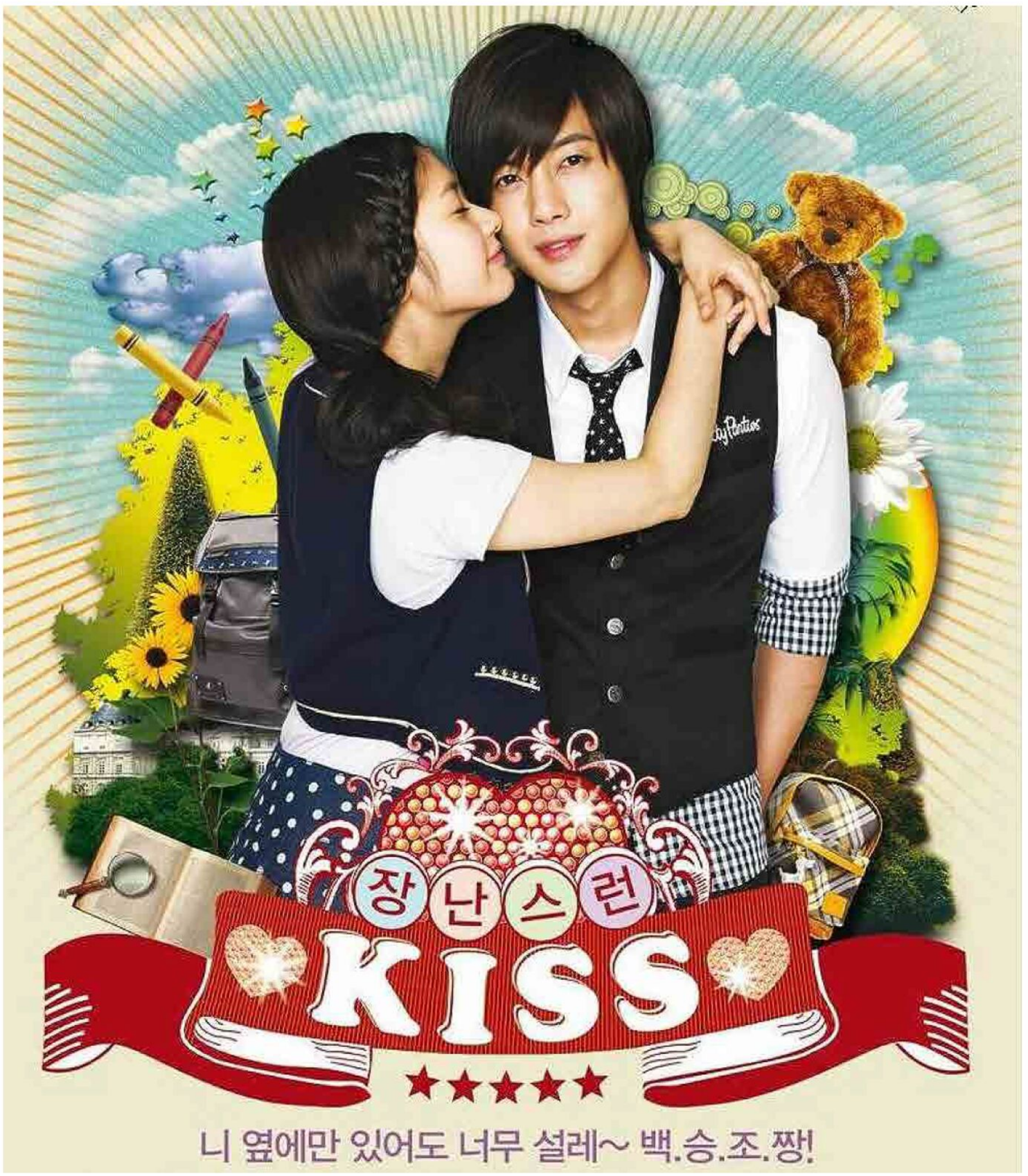
KOREAN FILM ARCHIVE, COURTESY OF NEWSIS

K-Drama Flashback: 'Playful Kiss'

'Playful Kiss,' starring Kim Hyun-joong and Jung So-min isn't so playful per se. Between its 'romance' and its 'comedy,' there's a toxic relationship and things to learn



THE PREMISE OF a love-hate relationship—when two distinct individuals start seemingly detesting each other—is fairly mined in teen romantic fiction. On alternate occasions, they belittle the other person up front, oblivious to a potent affinity that exists and intensifies with time, twisting hate into love—the gist of *Playful Kiss* in 2010 (aka *Mischievous Kiss* or *Naughty Kiss*), based on the Tada Kaoru-written Japanese manga *Itazura Na Kiss*. It was the third televised rendition of the manga, adhering to the Taiwanese *It Started with a Kiss* in 2005 and its follow-up *They Kiss Again* in 2007.

Fundamentally a romantic-comedy K-drama, it's a toxic love story that saw poor ratings in South Korea but became a global hit. An extended commemorative version following the series finale was made available on YouTube for this reason. *Playful Kiss* isn't so playful per se. Between its "romance" and its "comedy", there's a girl who keeps being mocked by a guy—very unsettling, yet the chain of events therein keeps you engaged. What works best is her character evolution in the subsequent episodes, her strength, irrespective of how subservient she is, and mostly how she makes it challenging for the narcissistic, grumpy guy to give in to her emotions.

At the heart of *Playful Kiss* are the repercussions of exchanges between two personality traits: wrapped up in himself, popular Baek Seung-jo (Kim Hyun-joong), who constantly denigrates and neglects a harebrained, ordinary Oh Ha-ni (Jung So-min), who romanticizes him nonetheless. At variance with Seung-jo, sharp as a tack and smart as a whip, celebrated in school, Ha-ni lags academically. Tension within them arises once she writes him a love letter, much to his chagrin, and manifolds when she's coerced into living with his family. Ha-ni endeavors to sway Seung-jo further, but winds up wary of his stern, harsh temperament and agrees to marry her classmate Bong Joon-gu (Lee Tae-sung). Seung-jo, as a result, grows restless and decides to win her back, fearing he may lose her.

The worldwide success of the show may also be attributed to the fact that it encourages taking chances and not giving up on a relationship.

Seung-jo maintains the image of the cocky, self-serving, and irritable male who dismisses a woman's feelings and condemns her in many ways. He throws her a kiss at a practically aggressive moment, and she instantly turns against him. Still, she loves him through his numerous insults, his indifference, and his bullying of her. The ongoing growth of her nature, which I already marked up, commands notice as the story advances. She can seem odd and frail at first, but she is tenacious—one who can work her fingers to the bone. Hence, she prevails in softening Seung-jo's heart. Ha-ni progresses in life, personifying an invaluable life lesson—with an unswerving mind and unflinching passion, anyone can brighten up—a major takeaway from the drama.

The worldwide success of the show may also be attributed to the fact that it encourages taking chances and not giving up on a relationship. It's a reminder of how ubiquitous scenarios like this are in society, pertinent to those who are experiencing abusive relationships. Also, toxic relationships tend to be viewed as interesting narratives, despite their portrayal of the awful. The mending of such a connection that ensues in *Playful Kiss* may parallel how most of us let go of the pain in pursuit of a happy closure.

DEBASHREE DUTTA

PHOTO COURTESY OF MBC

‘Boys Over Flowers’ and More: Five Iconic K-Dramas That Made a Difference

They fueled the Hallyu wave and became cultural landmarks; they were radical in presenting unfamiliar subjects, inventive in cinematic techniques, and unconventional in tackling tropes

‘NEVER IN A MONTH of Sundays will these K-dramas run out of glory for me; these, with their distinctive blend of narrative, inciting reflection, and a focus on contemporary issues, were rich reservoirs of implicit knowledge that may have contributed to the ability to alter how some things are interpreted for the better. Some of these, such as the epic *Boys Over Flowers*, also fueled the Hallyu wave and became cultural landmarks; some were radical in the way they presented unfamiliar subjects, employed inventive cinematography, or perhaps tackled tropes unconventionally. They are appreciably more in essence; they made a difference, and their splendor still manages to fill us in.

Coffee Prince *(2007)*

To revamp his family’s café, chaebol heir Choi Han-kyul (Gong Yoo) hires exclusively handsome men to serve customers. In the process, Yoon Eun-hye’s Go Eun-chan, a tomboy erroneously classified as a man, gets placed there; she keeps up deceit to retain her job but lands in a soup when Han-kyul starts feeling something for her (unaware of reality).

Coffee Prince was an anomaly in its defiance of gender stereotypes and articulate display of a woman’s assertiveness while taking on critical concerns in Korea. It was ahead of its time with its portrayal of a Hoyden heroine, juxtaposed with numerous K-dramas relying on feminine makeovers to draw attention. Its questions about gender binary, female identity, machismo, and patriarchy perhaps made *Coffee Prince* set a precedent, which is why it is still relevant to date.

Boys Over Flowers *(2009)*

In the posh Shinhwa high school, Geum Jan-di (Koo Hye-sun) of average means gets entangled with the formidable F4, led by the overbearing spoiled brat Gu Jun-pyo (Lee Min-ho). *Boys Over Flowers* has been credited as a forerunner in Korean high school drama, driving the propagation of the Hallyu wave and launching the storied career of superstar Lee Min-ho. But with aplomb, the drama ultimately shook the status quo and brought about a cultural shift; it inspired Korean men (and Asian men, for the record) to emulate their appearances. They started adopting the “Kkothminam”—the flower boy or pretty-boy image—dabbling with metrosexual fashion, sporting vibrant clothes, including cruise looks in pastel hues and floral prints, as well as wearing makeup.

Boys Over Flowers was criticized for its Cinderella story—a portrayal of bullying, power play, and class differences. I see things differently, though. The story is great in its depiction of true love and friendship. It originates with a love-hate connection, yet, come to think of it, that has to do with how emotional instability manifests itself in childhood as a result of parental estrangement or the existence of egocentric conflicts with the one you love.

Self-absorbed individuals are more prone to adverse responses in this aspect. Extreme circumstances could result in a sense of contempt for the other person until love begins to take hold. Probably the rationale why Jun-pyo has a thing for Jan-di. He is the obnoxious teenager attributed to his isolated childhood and lousy upbringing. In response to Jan-di’s steadfast resistance to Jun-pyo’s harassment and indifference to his fame, he turns to her further, and his initial hate translates to love. Disregarding the socioeconomic divides—the intricacies of their relationship, their unconditional love, and not forgetting the boys’ profound friendship—speaks to the soul and jogs memories many a time.

Good Doctor *(2013)*

Park Si-on (Joo Won) is an autistic prodigy who was accepted into a specialized school and was proven to have a photographic recall with incredible spatial intelligence. He has six months to show off his competence as a resident in pediatric surgery before commencing his official employment as a doctor. While Si-on gets flak for his emotional and cognitive state during the probation period, he transcends societal bigotry by tapping into his skills and succeeds thereby.

The K-drama is evocative, hinting at hope. The plot promoting consciousness about autism and how the socially challenged may contribute to society led *Good Doctor* to heaps of praise. Its insight and underlying innuendos are intended to inspire: regardless of who or how you are or the circumstances in which you find yourself, do dream and never let go, but be willing to put your nose to the grindstone, for perseverance is irreplaceable and inevitably reaps recompense.

My Love from the Star *(2013-2014)*

One of the few healing K-dramas, *My Love from the Star* is vivid and even insightful in its depth. Do Min-joon (Kim Soo-hyun), from the stars, sweeps Cheon Song-yi (Jun Ji-hyun) off her feet in this gorgeous Korean fantasy—an epic heart-fluttering romance that exceeds theatrical grandeur. The titular hero, Min-joon, an omnipotent alien who has been stranded on Earth, is dismayed to discover Hallyu star Song-yi residing next door. He gets entwined with Song-yi's turbulent life and repeatedly saves her, with only three months left until he makes it back to his world.

The effective high-speed cinematography and computer-generated shots of the action propelled the show to new heights. According to the Korean archives, with process photography, Min-joon's teleporting and time-freezing were recorded. The crew filmed the bullet-time images via specialized cameras and installed a 180-degree arc of GoPro cameras to capture the effect of stopped people.

One of *My Love from the Star*'s myriad accomplishments was its role as a cultural cornerstone. In a *CNN Travel* piece, it turns out that the show, where Seong-yi enjoys "Chimaek" (a mix of "chicken" and "Maekju," Korean beer), catalyzed a Chimaek fest in Ningbo, China, causing massive crowds outside Korean fried chicken stands. It also emphatically influenced the Korean market through booming overnight sales of the apparel, accessories, and beauty products used by Jun, the global recognition of the Korean language, and Korean tourism in that its shooting spots evolved to be popular draws.

It's Okay, That's Love *(2014)*

Zo In-sung co-starred with Gong Hyo-jin in the medical drama as the celebrated writer and radio host Jang Jae-yeol—pompous and witty yet with a mental condition. He is confined to slumbering in his bathtub, given his past and obsessive-compulsive disorder. A tense exchange in an interview makes him and Doctor Ji Hae-soo (Gong) acquaintances, and another event leads him to cohabit with her. The two begin at loggerheads but grow into lovers in no time. The issue is adapting to Jay-yeol's untreated schizophrenia.

At the APAN Star Awards (2014), Zo received the coveted Daesang ("Grand Prize") for a top-of-the-line performance. Likewise, the drama was revered for discussing the intolerance and societal slander endured by people with mental health problems. It disturbs me to consider that society generally regards people with mental health issues as outliers, resulting in a lack of their ability to open up. That makes things worse. It's essential, invariably, to share your thoughts—your state of mind. That's what *It's Okay, That's Love* is all about. In my mind, it's a blue-chip story that can genuinely help if you pay enough attention to it.

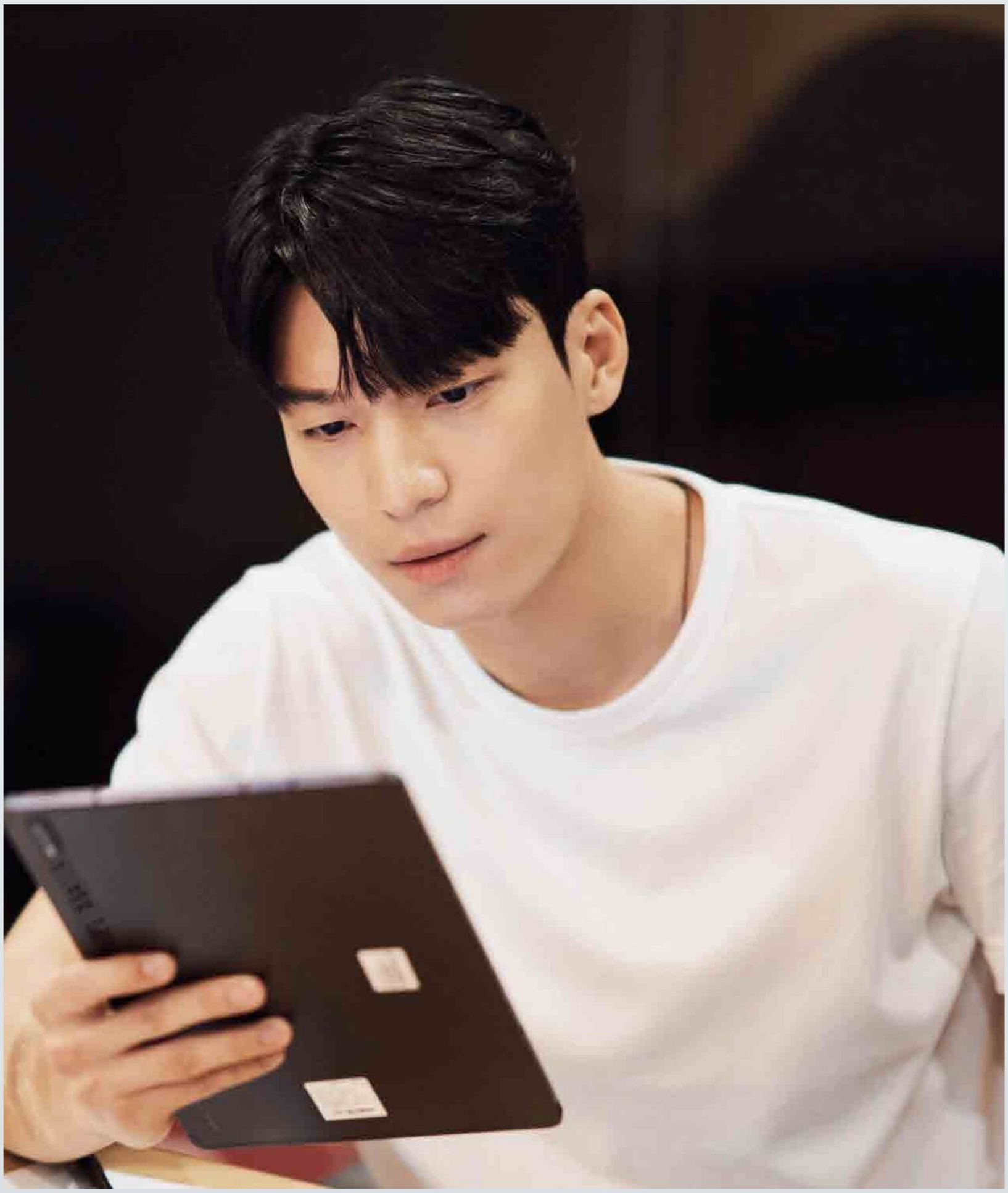
– DEBASHREE DUTTA

PHOTO COURTESY OF IMDB; HANCINEMA

Actor You Need to Know: Wi Ha-joon

Wi is sublime, specifically in dramatic acts that represent deeper issues, revealing inner emotional truths as well as the varying moods of various men

THE WHOLE NINE YARDS of Wi Ha-joon's acting aside, for me, what he did in *Midnight* (2021) is conspicuous. I despised him as much as I was awed by his unnervingly malicious Do-shik—a deranged serial killer. The raved psychological thriller film is a fatal hide-and-seek between him and a deaf Kyeong-mi (Jin Ki-joo) after she sees him stabbing a woman, becoming



his next quarry. Wi carved a real creep out of Do-shik, eliciting the ultimate embodiment of fear lurking in the shadows. And while Korean content is already well-versed in portraying such characters and narratives, through casting Wi as Do-shik, the industry secured another savvy performer whose hegemony shows on screen, perhaps more as "the bad guy."

Wi, 32, a theater and film major, made his debut in 2012 with a short film, followed by stints in a string of movies until landing a breakout role in the ghoulish horror *Gonjijam: Haunted Asylum* (2018). It's a found footage film—unveiling freakish happenings within a derelict, forsaken asylum—when the team of a horror web series led by Ha-joon (Wi) attempts a live stream there. With his veracity amid stellar work from the rest, he made a statement, thanks to the edge and temperament Wi gives his characters each time.

He is sublime, specifically in dramatic acts that represent deeper issues, revealing inner emotional truths as well as the varying moods of various men. So, he consistently makes his scenes and characterizations laudable, and thus, even in supporting parts, he has this way of catching the eye. After Gonjijam, Wi had roles in prominent K-dramas including *Something in the Rain* (2018), *Romance Is a Bonus Book* (2019), and *18 Again* (2020), getting praise and a nod for Best New Actor—Television at the 55th Baeksang Arts Awards for the role of Ji Seo-joon in *Romance Is a Bonus Book*.

The *Midnight* actor experienced a career uprush in 2021. Following *Midnight*'s success, Wi had the megahit magnum opus survival drama *Squid Game* and the mystery-thriller comedy drama *Bad and Crazy*. He plays Hwang Jun-ho, a cop who infiltrates the lethal game while masquerading as a guard to locate his lost brother. Even though Jun-ho's backstory doesn't come out much in the first season, we see him and get a sense of his lived experiences. The character catapulted Wi to international fame. I'm pinning hopes on getting more of his and his brother's story in the much-awaited *Squid Game Season 2*, where Wi is reprising his role.

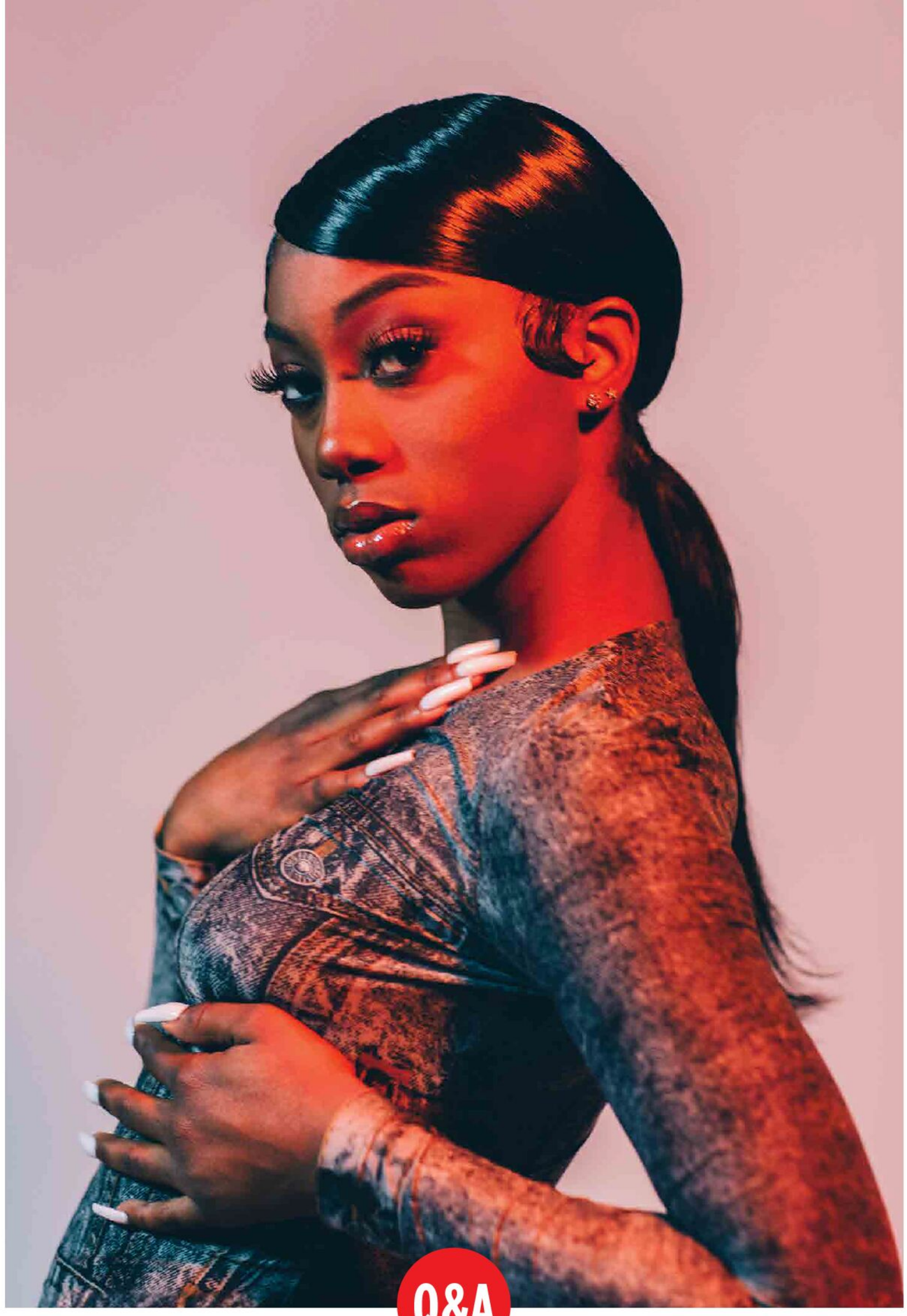
Bad and Crazy gave him another starring role, a memorable one, together with Lee Dong-wook, who portrays an able but unethical detective in the drama; his existence is immediately tossed into upheaval by an elusive, justice-seeking, rowdy crazy K played by Wi. In 2022, Wi returned with the noted mystery family drama *Little Women* (2022), centered on three closely-knit sisters who lived out of squalor. They get mired in intrigue through an incident, contesting the richest family in Korea. Here Wi cut an impressive Choi Do-il involved with Oh In-ju (Kim Go-eun, the eldest sister)—a mystery man whose loyalties for much of the show remain obscure.

The Midnight actor experienced a career uprush in 2021. Following Midnight's success, Wi had the megahit magnum opus survival drama Squid Game and the mystery-thriller comedy drama Bad and Crazy.

Wi is back with *The Worst of Evil* next to Ji Chang-wook in a nerve-racking image of righteousness and supremacy as Jung Gi-chul, the chief of a hefty criminal network active in the illicit drug trade between Korea, China, and Japan. The frantic action is abuzz with hazards and volatile with plot twists, stating a singular crime tale.

Gyeongseong Creature, theforthcoming period horror thrillerstarring Han So-hee and Park Seo-joon, will also include Wi in a pivotal roleas soldier Kwon Jun-tae, Park'sJang Tae-sang's trusted companion. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

PHOTO COURTESY OF DISNEY+; NETFLIX



Q&A

Flo Milli

One of the most fun rappers alive on her four alter egos, love from Lil Wayne, and working it out at the rage room

By ANDRE GEE

Flo milli shows up at Rolling Stone's New York office one August afternoon and holds court for an hour. After a spirited discussion about Raising Cane's chicken — Flo has a hack that involves mixing tenders with sauce in a cup — the 23-year-old Alabama rapper lets us in on her newest album, *Fine Ho, Stay*. Due this fall, it's the final LP of a trilogy, following 2020's *Ho, Why Is You Here?* and 2022's *You Still Here, Ho?* Flo (born Tamia Monique Carter) has consistently been one of the most fun listens in rap, rhyming with the candy-colored zeal of a *Clueless* character — albeit one who spits fire like "I cook like a chef and you bitches my dinner." *Fine Ho, Stay* is her most personal to date, and a more expansive version of her vibrant sound. Amazingly, much of it was recorded in one extremely productive night.

You seem to have overwhelming self-confidence. What do you attribute it to?
Being the underdog. Ever since I was younger, I've always been sure of myself. Even sometimes when I wasn't, I still came off like I was. I always been a lit bitch. Some people have that star quality, and people would try to make me feel like I shouldn't have been shining like that. But all that did was make me stronger.

You recorded a big part of *Fine Ho, Stay* in one night, right?
It was almost, like, what, 10 songs [that night]? It was me feeling it. I don't know how to explain it.

Was it 10 beats from a specific producer?
Yeah, it was one producer named Fyre.

You're going to be inhabiting four different alter egos in the videos and other creative for this album. How does that work?
I'm giving different versions of myself so that people know that I'm multifaceted. I have Florence Million, who's the pop star. She has aspects about her that's very girly and feminine, and I'm sure you've seen my Flo Milli flip. That's her hairstyle.

And then Dirty Floana is sexy, mysterious, savage. And Flo Ski is who I was for "Flo Milli," the Lil Wayne tribute. She has dreads, and she's the cool hipster girl — skateboarder, tomboy, but also unpredictable. And then last but not least, Flo Jo. That's my favorite one. What the fuck? Flo Jo is like the hood bitch. That's the one from Mobile [Alabama]. A bitch [throwing] a chair.

You released your breakthrough hit, "Beef (FloMix)," while you were still in college. What was that like?
I told my professor, literally as all the labels were reaching out to me, that I was switching classes. I was like, "My song is blowing up. I don't know what to do." He was like, "Make the right decision," and I never went back.

Tell me more about the "Flo Milli" freestyle. What made you want to rework Lil Wayne's "A Milli"?
I wanted to do it years ago, but I was scared. I was like, "Dang, this is a big song. And he's a GOAT." I wanted to wait till the right time. [It felt like] that time was now, plus it's the 50th year of hip-hop, so I wanted to pay tribute to him.

Has Wayne heard it?
He did post it on his [Instagram] story, and my manager talked to him. He said he loved it.

A lot of women in rap, historically, were the protégées of a male rapper. But now it seems like everybody's standing on their own. Why do you think that dynamic's shifted like that?
I feel like what goes around comes around. So if men feel like they could degrade women in music, then it's time we learn their ways and flip it back on them. It's about women becoming stronger and having a voice and being unapologetic about who they are. We're applying ourselves. Not to say that women before weren't, but I think it's more accepted now.

You see a lot of men supporting the Sexyy Reds, the GloRillas, the Lattos, the Ice Spices. We have to put a lot more work and money into it. We got to spend money on hair and makeup and all that. A guy could just throw on a chain, get a little haircut. A couple years ago, rappers would say crazy shit, and it would go viral. But for a girl, that would not work [in the past]. But I feel like now, girls can do that.

You tweeted, "I wish y'all would stop with this tired narrative y'all like to push about my career." What is that narrative and what made you talk about it?
Them saying I'm underrated, or the colorism thing. They want me to be insecure about my skin tone, which is never going to happen. I want people to understand everybody does not hate themselves. I think I'm a bad bitch, and there's nothing you could say that's going to make me think otherwise. So please stop.

You grew up doing theater and drama club. What do you remember about it?
My first plays were in church when we were doing the Easter program and the Christmas program, so it was more so stories in the Bible. When I got in the school drama club, the first play I did was *Peter Pan*, and I was a star, literally a star in the sky. I had a part, I said something, but I was in a big-ass star suit on the wall.

What do you do when you have a free day?
I like to read or go to the beach or go out to eat or get a massage. Oh, and I like to go to the rage room, too. I did it maybe four times last month. It's very therapeutic. ®

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Diwang Valdez**

The Passion of Julia Fox

JULIA FOX HAS LONG BEEN A NEW YORK CITY IT GIRL. BUT WITH HER NEW MEMOIR, 'DOWN THE DRAIN,' SHE'S PROVING THERE'S SO MUCH MORE TO HER THAN THAT

BY EJ DICKSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHIE SHAZAM

I AM ON A DATE WITH JULIA FOX — at least, that's what it feels like. We're in the dimly lit VIP suite at Body by Brooklyn, a spa inconspicuously tucked under the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in Clinton Hill. We're wearing fluffy terry-cloth robes; there are rose petals inexplicably strewn all over a bubble bath, which neither of us will get into. And about a minute and a half after I meet her, right before we're about to get massages, she gestures at me to take my bathing suit top off.

"Wait, babe, you have to take off the thing," she says in her signature drawl, a hybrid of Drew Barrymore's SoCal lilt and deadpan alt-left podcast-host vocal fry. "How are they gonna touch your back through your bathing suit?"

It's a fair point. I had worn the one-piece to make Fox feel comfortable — but also, having recently seen Fox in a see-through glass bustier at Cannes, and having had a kid within the past year, it struck me as borderline

masochistic to be naked in front of her. She's amused by my prudery, but understanding. "I want you to have a great massage experience," she says.

R&R does not come easily to Fox these days. She is a woman who wears many hats: model; actor; muse to Josh Safdie in *Uncut Jahhms,* per the infamous viral clip; influencer; former paramour and Carbone dining partner to the world's most famous rapper-slash-anti-Semite; and mom to two-and-a-half-year-old son Valentino, whom she will pick up from day care shortly. When I meet her, she is quite literally wearing one — a baseball cap from Diesel, paired with ruffled white shorts, bejeweled flats from Dsquared2, and a T-shirt of three Middle Eastern female bodybuilders, her hair dyed a vibrant shade of puce. (She looks fucking incredible, and, no, much like everything else Fox wears, you cannot pull it off.)

In October, Fox will be donning another hat: that of a memoirist with the release of her book, *Down the Drain.* Over spring rolls and pad thai, Fox says she wrote the book in a "vortex," on the two days a week when her ex, Peter Artemiev, has custody of Valentino. As a child, writing a book was a dream of hers, though she gave up on the idea after having one of her pieces read out loud by a middle school English teacher and mocked by her classmates. "I was like, 'I really can't ever share how I'm feeling because it's not going to be received well,'" she remembers thinking. "If I was shut down then, that really sealed it for me."

After reading *Down the Drain* — or, for that matter, after hearing Fox talk in pretty much any context, anywhere — it's hard to imagine a time when she was ever unwilling to share. She is the queen of self-disclosure, giving tours of her messy apartment on TikTok, speaking openly about her past with drugs and sex work, and famously penning an account of her date night with aforementioned ex Kanye West for *Interview Magazine* (though, as she recounts in the book, that account was far less straightforward than it appeared).

"If you can't handle the truth, that's your fucking problem," she says, and *Down the Drain* does not disappoint in this regard. It's full of harrowing tales of overdoses, abusive relationships with drug addicted ex-boyfriends, pregnancy loss, sexual assault, parental neglect, and shitting in the locker of a bullying rival dominatrix (though technically Fox did not shit in the locker so much as shit in a toilet and scoop it out).

But in truth, the version of Fox that the public has become acquainted with is distinct from the one in *Down the Drain.* The condom tube tops, the high-profile relationships, the extreme smoky eye — Fox's memoir makes clear that these are essentially armor. It's one of many ways in which a woman whose youth, glamour, and beauty have prompted people, mostly men, to project their own desires onto her, resists them doing so.

"It's performative," says Briana Andalore, Fox's stylist and longtime best friend. "She has to feed the baby, right? She has to put a roof over his head. Our mentality has always been, you gotta do what you gotta do. That's been our mentality our whole existence. It's a survivor mentality."

"i manifested being a single mom for myself," she says. "just because i've learned that men fuck everything up."

Fox has become so synonymous with New York City that it's hard to imagine her living elsewhere; in a city of transplants, she seems a rare orchid, albeit one in horse-tail and latex assless chaps. But she was actually born in Italy, living with her mother and grandfather there until she was six, then moving to New York to live with her itinerant father.

In "Down the Drain," Fox describes a childhood in which she was treated largely as a nuisance and left to her own devices, making caramels with sugar and a lighter in front of the TV at her grandfather's, or being locked in her room and using the cat-litter box for a bathroom while her dad was at work. "My childhood was definitely fucked up," she says. "But now that I'm a parent, I can have more understanding and see where my dad was not equipped. He was doing what he thought was right." Fox is far less generous toward her mother, who lives in Italy with her younger brother: "She's very anxious, very cold. [As a parent], I just try to do everything the opposite of her."

With her parents out of the picture, Fox largely grew up unsupervised, shoplifting from Upper East Side department stores and experimenting with drugs and sex starting in middle school.

In *Down the Drain,* Fox writes about being sexualized at an early age, getting high and fooling around with a 26-year-old at the age of 11 and taking pride in the eighth-grade boy who would grope her and compliment her ass whenever she walked down the hall at school. Life "was about surviving for the both of us," says Andalore. "We could just lock arms and live together without words, seeing eye to eye. Scheming and scamming was our love language."

In many ways, *Down the Drain* is a book about objectification: both about the psychic toll it takes, as well as Fox's efforts to navigate the world by alternately resisting or embracing it. "I think for a long time, I was a 'pick me,'" Fox says, using a term for women who seek out male approval. "I wanted to be hot and look good and have men like me and fawn all over me. I didn't care if it took a toll on who I really am. It [took] a lot of denial and a lot of lying to yourself."

Very quickly, Fox learned that while her looks could open some doors — "It helped us get into clubs," Andalore says — they could also lead her to some dark places. At 14, she met her first great love, a drug dealer who is identified as "Ace" in the book, whom she alleges was both physically and emotionally abusive, tracking her whereabouts and sending her threatening letters. Andalore, who lived with Fox at the time, says witnessing the relationship was deeply painful and that it had a long-standing impact on Fox: "It creates trauma that you don't deal with in the moment," she says. "Trauma comes in waves. You might not be experiencing it today or tomorrow or a month from now, but you never know when it's going to creep up and affect you."

At the time, Fox blamed herself for the abuse. "I have a lot of shame around it," Fox says. "When women are put into abusive situations, we often [are] like, 'How could I have been so dumb to let that happen?' That part was probably the hardest, just having to reopen things that I had really pushed out of my mind." She ended up in a mental institution from the stress.

It was that experience with Ace that prompted Fox to come out last year in support of another widely misunderstood female celebrity, Amber Heard, at a time when no other celebrities were doing so. She felt compelled to defend Heard, even though she received panicked phone calls from her team telling her not to. "I said to my friends, 'The tides are gonna turn eventually,'" she says. "And that's the thing: If I just know and believe in my heart that I'm right, then I don't give a fuck what anyone else has to say."

When she was in her late teens, Fox started working as a dominatrix, which appealed to her, she writes, due to the lack of penetrative sex involved and her "experience in hating men." (She also came up with a fairly ingenious

HAIR BY JOHN NOVOTNY FOR OPUS BEAUTY USING ORIBE. MAKEUP BY JULIAN STOLLER FOR OPUS BEAUTY USING SHISEIDO ARCHLINER INK STYLO EYELINER INK. STYLING BY BRIANA ANDALORE. PREVIOUS SPREAD: VEIL BY NAMILIA. CHOKER BY BOOTZY COUTURE. BODYSUIT BY NAMILIA. SHOES BY PLEASERS. THIS PAGE: DRESS BY ПОЛИНА МИЛАЕВА.

way to use a funnel, though squeamish readers may wish to skip that part.) "It was like, 'Listen, I'm gonna be objectified either way,'" she recalls thinking. "'So I might as well just capitalize on it and own it.'"

Fox loved the job; after years of her sexuality being weaponized against her, she found being able to monetize it empowering. "I went into it thinking, 'I'm a piece of shit, I'm not worth anything. No matter how many times someone would tell me, 'You're beautiful, you're so hot,' the only thing I listened to was the money. I'm getting booked the most often. I have the most clients. So I could quantify it. I could see it. And then I had to believe it," she says. "So it really helped with my self-worth."

It's easy to see why she was so successful: In person, Fox is warm without being ingratiating, and gracious without being irritating. But there's also an aloofness to Fox, who rarely smiles and tends to fix her unblinking blue eyes on you, as if she's trying to gauge whether you're compelling enough to be worth her time. "Inside, she's warm and sweet and loving and giving," says Andalore. "But there's a very hard and intense exterior on the outside." You get the sense that this quality would be devastatingly appealing to a certain type of man who would view it as a challenge, and also that she largely had to develop it out of necessity.

"I've always been intuitive in that way, where I have a pretty good track record of being like, 'That's such a bad person,' and then arguing with my friends over it, and then fast-forward, they're a bad person. And I'm like, 'See, I told you so,'" she says. "When you grow up in the city, and you're on your own, you kind of have to be hypervigilant. You do get to learn to read people and read between the lines and hear the unspoken things."

Throughout her twenties, Fox became well-known on the downtown party circuit, briefly running a fashion line with Andalore that was financed primarily by Fox's boyfriend at the time, a wealthy older man she met through her work as a domme whom she identifies as Antoine in her memoir. Fox characterizes this period as intensely stressful — not just because her livelihood and those of her friends were dependent on her relationship, but because of the psychic toll of performing for Antoine, who she says nicknamed her "*poupée*," French for "doll."

Older men "saw me as the version of me that they created in their mind, like a young, carefree, spirited, adventurous, attractive, youthful, energized [woman]," she says. "In reality, I was jaded, and hanging on by a thread. But obviously, I wasn't going to shatter their expectations, because that doesn't benefit me. So I'm going to act like I am these things until it wears on my soul."

Eventually, the seams started to show. As Fox writes in her book, the relationship with Antoine ended when he discovered she was sleeping with another man, and she and her friends had to scramble to support themselves. "She had to grow up really fast and figure things out and take care of herself and hustle and grind and provide for herself," says her best friend, model and photographer Richie Shazam, who lived with her at the time. "And she always found a way. She literally always found a way."

Before the fashion line ended, Fox invested the majority of her savings in a club with the other man, a relationship that imploded after he allegedly attacked her at the club. Fox publicly spoke out against him, and much like Amber Heard, she says, she was "ostracized

and punished" by her social circle for doing so. "At every corner, there were people talking about me and calling me crazy and saying that I was jealous and made it up," she says. (Through a lawyer, the ex previously denied the charges to the *New York Post*.)

After that, Fox left New York, briefly moving to Louisiana. She started using heroin more regularly, staying in contact with old friends only intermittently. "That was petrifying for me," Andalore says. "I was afraid she wouldn't wake up one day." When a friend invited Fox to meet in New York and fly down to Miami on a billionaire's private jet, she jumped at the chance. On the jet, she alleges in *Down the Drain,* she was roofied and sexually assaulted by an unnamed billionaire, an incident she did not report to the police. "I already knew what happened when I tried to call the police and stand up for myself," she says. "There was nothing I could do. So the only thing that seemed like the rational thing to do was pretend it didn't happen."

Fox's breakout role as Julia, the vampy mistress of Adam Sandler's sleazy diamond dealer in 2019's *Uncut Gems,* could not have come at a better time. On paper, the part, which the Safdie brothers wrote specifically for her, could have easily fit into the category of manic-pixie-dream-hottie roles that older men projected onto her. But Fox says it did not, largely because she played an active role in shaping the trajectory of the character (it was her idea, for instance, to have Julia trash Sandler's apartment during their breakup scene). The success of the movie not only catapulted her to mainstream fame virtually overnight, but brought her something she had rarely experienced before: acclaim for something other than her looks. "Having that was so validating," she says.

But the success of *Uncut Gems* was something of a double-edged sword. Its release coincided with the overdose death of her friend Gianna; in *Down the Drain,* Fox writes of sniffing oxy with her right before shooting a love scene with Sandler. Now, Fox was in the position of having to grieve her while promoting the film. "Everyone was talking to me about this one thing, but there's this glaring other thing in my brain," she recalls. "In a way, maybe it was a blessing. Because if I hadn't been able to have the distraction of having to show up and do that, then I would have probably gone off the deep end."

Prior to Gianna's death, Fox had gone on the anti-addiction drug Suboxone, and had tried to persuade Gianna to go on it as well. She has been open about being in recovery: "I do want to talk about the Suboxone, and I do want to raise awareness, because I feel there's a stigma around these maintenance drugs, but they really do fucking save lives," she says.

But this openness has been used against her. Last year, Azealia Banks attacked her on Instagram for her history of drug use, referring to her son as a "crackbaby." "If people want to harp on that, it's like, 'OK, you're part of the reason why people don't get treatment,'" Fox says. "So if I have to be a pioneer for that, then sure, whatever."

In *Down the Drain,* Fox writes that West accused her of hiding her history of drug use from him, with West claiming he had only found out about it when his ex, Kim Kardashian, told him. (Fox has never directly spoken to Kardashian, but says she was "a fan of hers" before dating West: "It was interesting to get a bird's-eye view into that situation," she says of witnessing the end of their relationship.)

Those who followed the breathless recounting of Fox and West's short-lived courtship in the tabloids will be pleased to know that there is, indeed, a section about the relationship with the rapper, whom she refers to in *Down the Drain* as "the artist." Fox was hesitant to write about him, knowing that "everyone's gonna focus on it. But I felt like I had to mention it. It was such a pivotal moment for me."

In *Down the Drain,* Fox paints an unflinching portrait of her whirlwind relationship with West, meeting him in Miami on New Year's Eve and getting scuttled from hotel room to hotel room for public outings, with him approving her wardrobe and criticizing her body to the point of offering her a boob job. She describes the relationship as completely chaste, playing Uno and dictionary games on their first date and only getting physical when the cameras were on. "It wasn't [sexual] at all," she says. (Of West's anti-Semitism, Fox, who is not Jewish, says she saw none of that during their time together, and that he primarily talked about his creative projects and his issues with Kardashian. "It caught me by surprise as much as everyone else," she says. "It just felt like religious psychosis or something.")

She says that at the time, she was largely motivated by anger at her ex for what she perceived as his lack of involvement and support for her and Valentino, blasting him on Instagram for being a "deadbeat dad" (she says they are on better terms now), and she says West had similar intentions. "I think it kind of warped into weaponizing me to get back at his ex-wife. That's why the relationship only lasted a month," she says. The infamous *Interview Magazine* article about their date, she alleges in *Down the Drain,* was largely fictional and written at his team's behest. That was the first "red flag," she says. "When I realized what was happening, I was like, 'I don't want to be part of this.'"

When discussing the benefits of the relationship on her career, and the opportunities that exposure afforded her, Fox is clear-eyed: "I made a lot of money. That was great," she says. But Andalore, who styled Fox during that period and continued to work for West for a short time after the breakup, characterizes it as "demonic and scary" for Fox, saying it caused her "emotional distress." Fox also struggled with articles painting her as a starfucker and a gold digger, as well as the example it would set for her son. "If I wasn't a mom, I probably would have stuck it out longer," she says. "If I was still that version of myself, I would have probably just been like, 'It's a good opportunity, just do it.' Now that I'm a mom, I have a higher moral standard for myself."

Motherhood, says Andalore, is Fox's guiding principle: "The number-one thing that she is is a mom. That's the only thing that's really important to her at the end of the day. All the other stuff doesn't matter." Fox and Valentino live with Shazam and Shazam's boyfriend in an uptown railroad apartment, a dynamic Fox describes as "like that movie *Three Men and a Baby,* but it's girls and gays and theys."

Every day, she drops Valentino off at day care, cooks him dinner, and falls asleep in bed with him watching *The Magic School Bus* or *Go, Dog, Go!*. "I've always felt Julia has always been a mom figure," says Shazam. "[And] Valentino is her biggest priority." Occasionally, they'll go to Tompkins Square Park or hang out with Fox's other celeb-mom friend Emily Ratajkowski, but other than the two days a week Valentino spends with Fox's ex, she largely parents by herself.

"I always knew I was going to be a single mom. I manifested that for myself," she says. "Just because I've learned over time that men fuck everything up."

Finding a traditional type of co-parent is not something Fox is particularly interested in. She is on Raya, but rarely uses it: "I'm like, where are the celebrities? It's all investment-finance bros at this point." Having had to use sex as currency for much of her life, she says she is, and mostly always has been, largely uninterested in sex. "The cons outweigh the pros — like, having to get that close to somebody, letting someone in your space, and all the things that come with that," she says. "My experience has been that sex either ruins everything, or complicates everything. And I just don't have the bandwidth at this point in my life."

In truth, she has a lot going on. Fox is set to host a reality-TV show she helped develop about fashion upcycling, and she recently shot a small role as a real-estate agent in an upcoming Steven Soderbergh film, having already worked with him in 2021's *No Way Out*. (She has stayed in touch with the Safdies, but has no plans to work with them anytime soon: "They're doing another movie with Adam, but they didn't ask me to be in it, so whatever.")

She also wrote a movie that's in preproduction about two girls who accidentally kill their sugar daddy. The movie, she says, is essentially about the lengths young women must go to to navigate the world without family support. "If you're looking at the girl who has the rich dad and the nice car and you want the car, too, you're gonna have to make some decisions that you'll then have to live with," she says. "I feel like that's kind of what the theme of the movie is." (Her dream casting for the lead is the one thing she told me during our conversation that was off the record; suffice to say it is, in true Julia Fox fashion, both off-the-wall and kind of perfect.)

It's a fitting screenwriting debut for a woman who, as Andalore describes it, has adopted, and will continue to adopt, a "survivor mentality" throughout her entire life, one that is encapsulated by one scene in *Down the Drain,* when Fox is at a famous rapper's party in Miami Beach with West. After being chastised by a member of his entourage for twerking on the dance floor, a chastened Fox scans a "sea of neon party dresses and BBLs" looking for West. Of the women, she writes, "they willingly fade into the background, waiting for their come-up. They're party decorations, ornaments to be admired. I'm not like that anymore. I already had my come-up, and I'm not going back to being objectified and used as fuel for the egos of insecure men."

I ask Fox if, when she was writing this passage, and when she was dating West, she was thinking at all about Antoine, the older French millionaire who had treated her as his poupée. She says she saw some parallels. "[I was thinking], 'I had already been chosen, [and] reaped all the benefits, and then lost it all,'" she says. "And I already knew that that wasn't the road to happiness for me. I'd already gone through that whole cycle. And it was like, 'Wait a minute, I'm being told to get back in line.' No. I can live without this. I'm good."

ONE GREAT ROCK MOVIE CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

Twenty years after 'School of Rock,' the filmmakers and cast remember making the hilarious 2003 comedy with a heart of gold

By ANGIE MARTOCCIO

IT WAS 20 years ago this month that Jack Black put on a bow tie, walked into a prep school, and told a bunch of fourth graders to get the Led out. His star turn as the lovable loser in Richard Linklater's *School of Rock* helped the film gross nearly $20 million when it opened, breaking the record for music-themed comedies at the time. Over the years, it's inspired a hit Broadway musical, a TV show, and a children's book, and helped popularize actual School of Rock programs for kids who want to serve society by rocking. Two decades on, it remains a wildly funny movie with honest-to-God great tunes — and its kind, inclusive spirit has aged much better than most 2000s comedies. Here's the story of *School of Rock*, as told through 30 new interviews with Black, Linklater, Sarah Silverman, Miranda Cosgrove, Maryam Hassan, and others.

I. THE ORIGINAL SCHOOL OF ROCK

In 1975, a 27-year-old Canadian musician got a job teaching at an elementary school in rural British Columbia.

Hans Fenger (The Langley Schools Music Project): I became a teacher purely by accident. I had no clue what I was doing, and I never wanted to be a teacher, but life got in the way. My girlfriend got pregnant. I needed a job. I showed up there with hair all over the place.

Teaching afternoon classes with very little supervision, Fenger showed his students how to play songs by David Bowie and Fleetwood Mac.

Fenger: Kids' music is so "I want to teach the world to sing in harmony! Peace in the world! My pets are really nice!" Meanwhile, kids didn't feel that. They felt lonely. They felt sad. Many of them came from bad backgrounds. The purpose of music is to express an emotion, but there was no music for six-year-olds to do that.

In 1976, Fenger spontaneously brought the kids into the gymnasium and recorded them with his friend's Revox tape recorder. The album they made, Innocence & Despair, *was quickly forgotten and ignored for decades — until a 2001 repressing on CD made it a cult classic, and grabbed the attention of a young screenwriter named Mike White.*

II. THE SCREENPLAY

White used Fenger's story as the inspiration for a screenplay about a down-on-his-luck rock singer who poses as a substitute teacher at a prep school — and forms a band with his students.

Jack Black (Dewey Finn): Mike White was my neighbor. He just made me laugh so much. I was always fascinated by his strange magic.

White wrote a part for Black in 2002's Orange County, *in which the actor played Colin Hanks' stoner brother. Then White got the idea to write a movie with Black as the star.*

Black: Part was written for me, didn't have to audish. The truth is, once *High Fidelity* came out in theaters, I didn't even need headshots anymore.

Producer Scott Rudin, who'd worked with White on Orange County, *wanted Austin-based director Richard Linklater for their next project.*

Richard Linklater (Director): This script shows up. I read it and passed. It was cheesy; there was a formulaic quality to it. Then I got a call from my agent. She's like, "Rudin is not accepting your pass."

Black: I loved Richard Linklater because I loved *Slackers*, and I thought *Dazed and Confused* was brilliant. Obviously, he knew rock. I was nervous, though,

PLAY THE SONG, SCHNEEBLY
From left: Linklater on set with Falduto; Black delivers a lesson; the kids in the cast line up for a costume test.

because it seemed like all of his movies were kind of low-budge indie experiments. This has potential to be a big summer hit.

Black, Linklater, and White all met up at the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles to discuss the script.

Black: I don't think that Mike White and Richard Linklater ever would've gotten together to collaborate had it not been for Scott Rudin, because they're very different temperaments. They're a little bit like oil and water. They didn't always totally get along.

Linklater's main concern was that the story White had written was unrealistic.

Black: He was like, "I don't believe this. They're doing a music class and nobody finds out? They have to soundproof the classroom."

Sam Hoffman (First Assistant Director): There were a lot of elements that were pushing it in a very theatrical direction. Rick's Texan take on it was to make it more real.

Linklater: It was, as Jack would say, ridonculous that you could get away with this. I want there to be a logic within the world that makes sense. Still, if you really break it down, that wouldn't be enough sound insulation to keep the room next door from knowing you got a full rock & roll band going in here. But at least we're letting everyone know, "We thought about that."

III. CASTING

In keeping with his usual style, Linklater steered away from casting professional Hollywood kids.

Black: It's Linklater. He's gifted, famously, at picking people to be in his movies, starting with *Dazed and Confused*. Look at that cast — every other person is a huge star now. It was all their first movies, and he saw their potential. And with this one, it was really important. None of them felt like child actors that are trying to make it with their stage moms.

Hoffman: One of the amazing things that Rick did was cast kids who could play and sing.

Ilene Starger (Casting Director): We wanted as much reality as possible. No one would be dubbed or would be pretending to play an instrument.

Rogier Stoffers (Cinematographer): You do a Hollywood movie and the studio goes, "Oh, we have this cute kid in this Disney show." And then Rick's like, "Well, can she play the guitar?"

Joey Gaydos Jr. had attended a music camp in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His parents got an email inviting him to audition for a film in Chicago.

Joey Gaydos Jr. (Zack): My dad was a musician, and I was in the baby gate trying to listen in on rehearsal. I wanted to play as soon as I could. I had to let my hands grow before I could actually physically play guitar, but if I could have started earlier, I would have.

Others ended up winging it.

Cole Hawkins (Leonard): The only thing that they had taught us to play in a New York City public school was a recorder, so I faked it.

Angelo Massagli (Frankie): They asked me to sing. I just started belting "Crazy Train" by Ozzy, which is the only song I knew the words to.

Rivkah Reyes (Katie on bass) and Robert Tsai (Lawrence on keyboards) were scouted after appearing on the radio show From the Top, *which features classically trained children.*

Rivkah Reyes (Katie): My mom got me all these hair accoutrements from Limited Too, and I had this electric Daisy Rock guitar that my uncle had bought me. I did indeed rock out, and then two days later, I got the job. The cool part was that they had not written my character yet.

Maryam Hassan (Tomika): They allowed us to be the kids that auditioned for the movie. Of course, it may not have been our story fully, but the personality, that was us.

Caitlin Hale (Marta): I don't feel like I was acting. I was very sassy. A lot of what you saw was just me being me.

Gaydos Jr.: A hundred percent. Only when I had to act so bummed out in the movie a lot — that was the greatest extent of my acting. Inside, I was having the best time.

"This script shows up. I read it and passed. Then I got a call from my agent: '[Scott] Rudin is not accepting your pass.'"

— director richard linklater

Brian Falduto (Billy): They were very much creating the script while casting. I was supposed to be this nerd who's really into all the technical aspects, but then I ended up being a fashion designer.

Linklater: I remember Rudin liking the idea of having one of the kids be effeminate. I was like, "That's pretty radical." Even casting Brian and talking to his parents, I was like, "I don't know if you guys know yet, but young Brian is gay." They were cool with it.

Stoffers: [Linklater] was like, "I'm not going to make some kid play gay. You have to find it, otherwise we find somebody else." I think that's one of the biggest secrets of how it worked.

Several actors auditioned for the role of Summer, originally written as an aspiring singer with blond hair.

Hale: I auditioned to be Summer. I remember there being a lot of us.

Jordan-Claire Green (Michelle): Initially, in the first draft of the script, her character was completely different. She was a pop-star type, a young Britney Spears.

But an eight-year-old brunette won Linklater over.

Miranda Cosgrove (Summer): I had done the pilot for *Drake & Josh*, which is really the first thing I'd ever done. I wasn't sure if it was picked up yet, and then I found out that I got *School of Rock*.

Linklater: She was a year younger than everybody else, almost too young. But I just loved her delivery and her mannerisms.

Starger: Summer was written as a blond girl, a teacher's favorite, a gold-star-obsessed girl with utter determination, smarts, and leadership abilities. Miranda has dark hair, but she was perfect.

Cosgrove: I was definitely an overachiever type. I tried really hard in school, and I definitely cared about grades. They ended up making Summer the character I ended up playing,

ABOUT TO ROCK
From near left: White and Silverman; Afflerbach, Green, and Infante have some fun behind the scenes; Joan Cusack.

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and then they split it into another role with Tomika, who's a really good singer, and they made me the band manager.

Black: When I first met her, I was like, "Are you sure she should be the manager? She seems a little shy." Linklater was like, "Nah. She's got something that's very special." He called it.

Hassan, who had never acted before, was the last to get cast.

Starger: Tomika was written as having a great voice, yet she didn't want to be in the spotlight. We had seen many, many young girls for this role, but no one seemed quite right for it. The film's start date was approaching, but we were not going to settle. We had an open call on a Saturday in NYC, and I was worried. Then, near the end of that open call, Maryam came in with her mother. Her voice just floored us.

Linklater: We were having trouble finding someone who could really belt, and she just stepped up out of nowhere. I was like, "Oh, my God."

Joan Cusack was cast as the school's principal, and White played Ned Schneebly, the actual substitute teacher impersonated by Black's character. Sarah Silverman played Schneebly's girlfriend.

Sarah Silverman (Patty Di Marco): I always find Jewish and Italian very interchangeable. I was just so excited to be in a movie with Jack. He's the menschiest person.

"I don't feel like I was acting. I was very sassy. A lot of what you saw was just me being me."

— Caitlin Hale (Marta)

Black: Sarah Silverman was from that world of *Mr. Show* and alt-comedy of the Nineties. So her brand of humor is like, she'll shock you with the things that she says. This role was way more of a straight character and a villainess.

Silverman: That was a time where women who were comics didn't really get to be funny in movies. They just were the ones going, "When are you going to get a job?" She's cunty and angry. But wouldn't you be if you lived with your boyfriend and his buddy took up the whole living room and never paid rent and was a dick to you and you couldn't even bring it up without being made into an asshole?

IV. FILMING

Shooting began on Dec. 2, 2002. At first, Black was nervous about working with kids.

Black: In retrospect, it seems ridiculous because I'm such an immature idiot that it was a perfect match to be with a bunch of kids. We had a blast — horsing around and making jokes and making fart noises in between takes.

Green: The only time I ever saw him get nervous was one night we were on set, and he said a cuss word. I think it was "shit." He apologized to our parents. My mom was like, "You don't think she's ever heard me say 'shit'?"

One week in, Linklater had to replace one of the kids.

Linklater: I shouldn't even be saying all this publicly.... It was in rehearsals. There was a kid who wasn't with the program, so there were tough decisions to be made. I think he wanted a bigger part.

Hale: I don't want to shit on anybody, but he was unprofessional.

Veronica Afflerbach (Eleni): The kid was counting lines and creating a culture of competition.

Reyes: He was giving know-it-all energy. It's so cheesy that I'm about to quote it, but we were serving society by rocking, and there was no room for ego in that.

Linklater: I always tell people: "Hey, don't fuck with me, I fired a kid on *School of Rock*."

James Hosey, a redhead from Larchmont, New York, replaced the fired actor.

James Hosey (Marco): They chose the best possible replacement on Earth, I think.

V. THE MUSIC

Linklater wanted to make sure School of Rock *was a legit rock & roll movie, so music supervisor Randall Poster brought in Sonic Youth's Jim O'Rourke. He started the kids off with simple songs, like "Sweet Jane."*

Jim O'Rourke (Music Consultant): I would go on set any time they shot a music scene to see if they've made a mistake. We were working at the Sonic Youth studio.

Gaydos Jr.: Jim was of an experimental, eclectic New York cool scene that I had no idea about at the time. Those are the memories I think about: being in his apartment and looking at his records, or his roaches in the ashtray.

O'Rourke: It wasn't a roach. I was smoking rolling-tobacco cigarettes.

The character of Summer was not a great singer, but Cosgrove was. O'Rourke had to teach her how to mangle an off-key "Memories" from Cats.

Cosgrove: They had me take a bad-singing lesson. I think I did two or three of them to get it right. It's so funny: I was probably trying really hard to sing terribly, which makes no sense.

O'Rourke: I was probably imitating goats. And Bob Dylan.

Cosgrove: I feel like most people have never taken a bad-singing lesson, but I highly recommend it.

In the early Nineties, Linklater had unsuccessfully attempted to get the rights to use a Led Zeppelin song in Dazed and Confused. *Ten years later, when they shot the Battle of the Bands scene, he tried again.*

Linklater: I remember being so sad about that. I was like, "OK, there's got to be something we can do." I pulled Jack aside and said, "We've got to get their attention. I think it'll be harder for them to say no to you."

Black: At the end of a shooting day, he said, "I want to do a thing where you beg Led Zeppelin to let us use

STICK IT TO THE MAN
From left: Cosgrove; costume shots of Clark, Aleisha Allen, and Hassan (clockwise from left); Gaydos and Clark, with Black on drums.

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'Immigrant Song,' and just use the crowd and get them to chant along with you." So I said, "Led Zeppelin, lords of rock," and had the audience repeat after me.

Linklater: In very short order, our pitch was, "There's a new generation of kids being churned out every decade-plus, and some of them haven't heard of Led Zeppelin. Maybe it's cool for this rock & roll movie to feature you so prominently."

Black: He sent that over to them, and by God, it worked.

VI. THE PREMIERE

School of Rock *was released on Oct. 3, 2003. Most of the cast didn't realize how big the film was until it hit theaters.*

Massagli: There was a premiere in L.A. We're at the afterparty at this club. I don't know how we all got in there. Me and Joey walked up to the bar, like, "Can we get a Coke?" And then I remember hearing someone go, "Put some Jack in that Coke." And me and Joey look to our right, and there was Kid Rock and Sheryl Crow. And then you turn around and it's the Osbournes and the *Jackass* guys in all their glory. It was just surreal.

Green: All these celebrities were excited to meet us at these red-carpet events. I remember going to the MTV Awards, and Brittany Murphy was getting out of her car at the same time. She came over to us and was like, "Oh, my God! I'm so excited to meet you guys!" And I was like, "What is happening?"

VII. THE LEGACY

Twenty years later, School of Rock *is revered as a classic music comedy, with themes of diversity and inclusivity that were way ahead of its time.*

Reyes: It just warms my heart that it's aged so gracefully and that it still has this powerful message of radical self-acceptance. *School of Rock* allowed us to really let our freak flags fly. When you have a whole room full of underdogs, it's so powerful.

Z Infante (Gordon): I felt this connection with other queer members of the cast — Brian, Riv, and I were like magnets. I didn't know I was queer at the time, but there's something queer about *School of Rock.* There's something about challenging the status quo, about sticking it to the man, that creates this incredible environment for people of all backgrounds, sexual orientation, gender identities, races, religions. Whoever you are, you're welcome at the School of Rock.

"I was like, 'Are you sure she should be the manager? She seems a little shy.' Linklater was like, 'Nah. She's special.'"

— Jack black on miranda cosgrove

Falduto: When I did finally come out and I started sharing my story, I got all these messages from guys who are my age who saw me onscreen when I was younger, and they were like, "You were exactly what I needed to see. Thank you so much."

Hassan also gets messages from fans about the scene in the movie where Mr. S gives a pep talk to Tomika about body positivity.

Hassan: Over the pandemic, my phone was nonstop. I'd get DMs from people who were around nine or 10 when they saw it, like, "That helped me so much," or they'll show it to their kids who are in the same situation. Now more than ever, with body positivity being a huge conversation, I'm so honored that I was a part of that scene. Because I was a plus-size kid, and I'm a plus-size woman now, and I'm confident.

The cast of School of Rock *never stopped being friends. They have a long-standing group text titled Schnayblay, and they're planning on celebrating the film's 20th anniversary this fall. Most importantly, they want to honor castmate Kevin Clark (Freddy the drummer), who died in a 2021 accident.*

Infante: Kevin is a central piece. We are still mourning. Something's missing.

Reyes: It was heartbreaking. Kevin was my brother. He was my best friend on set from day one. We both bonded over being Jewish and Chicagoan and liking Green Day. In his last few years, he had been teaching at a School of Rock.

Falduto: I'm getting emotional. There's only 14 other people who've had that experience with me for 20 years now. And to lose someone like that just felt like I lost a part of my family.

Reyes: Joey and I play together in a band. He and I always get to the rehearsal space a little early just so [we] can be in the room with the drum set. And the snare drums would just rattle every once in a while, and we'd be like, "He's here."

Gaydos Jr.: I feel him at all times. I wish he could be here. You just feel like he wasn't done yet, and that's the hardest part. Too young.

VIII. ENCORE

For Black, School of Rock *is a career highlight.*

Black: That's the one that's nearest and dearest to my heart, because it was so much a part of me — that character with the love of rock and not really fitting in the world of rock. It does mirror my experience with the entertainment industry. It felt like the planets aligned and I got to do the movie that I was born to do. It didn't really matter if I did anything else after that. I can just chill and relax now, because I did it.

But not so much for the guy who inspired it all.

Fenger (The Langley Schools Music Project): When *School of Rock* came out, I got tons of mail and phone calls from people who said, "Hey, you should see this movie. It's about you. Did you get paid?" It was a beautiful movie, don't get me wrong, but it wasn't what I did. I would've loved to have been in a position where I could teach kids AC/DC riffs, but that wasn't me. And I'm still poor. ®

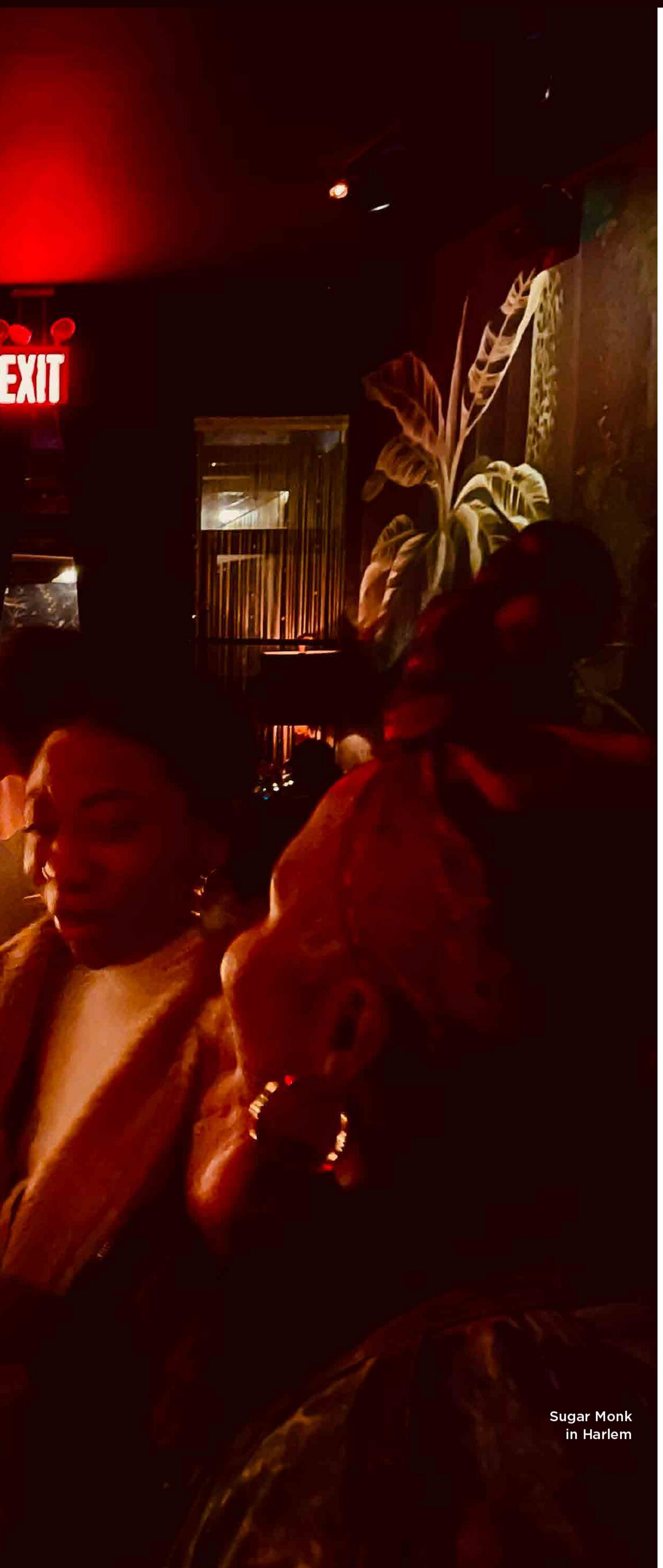
REUNION TOUR
From near left: Clark, who died in 2021, remains in his castmates' memory; Green, Falduto, and Infante share a toast at a recent event.

POP STUFF:
FIVE O'CLOCK SOMEWHERE

'Let me conjure a cocktail tour of Manhattan, one that those wordsmiths who were partial to the bottle might like to take'

By **Soleil Nathwani**

SUGAR MONK



Sugar Monk
in Harlem

On a recent Sunday night, I walked down a short flight of steps on Grove Street in Manhattan's West Village and through a door marked with a compass, as if to indicate I was in the right place. Inside, a hostess with a bright smile and kind eyes (that urban rarity) asked me a wait just a couple minutes till a seat cleared. I remembered the drill – just as many people as there were seats, my kind of bar. A few minutes later, I was seated on a tall chair in the center of a long wood counter, so cozy I could wrap my arms around it, looking up at a plump angel with the tiniest devil's horns peeking out from his sleek black mop. He was wearing a blue velveteen robe, his eyes cast down towards the almost cloudless sky, towards ringleted cherubs, towards the bar from which he was likely inhaling the angel's share. Angel's Share (the bar's namesake) refers to the alcohol lost to evaporation when a spirit is poured into oak barrels, an undefinable sliver – just enough to get a cherub high.

If this image isn't familiar, it's the mural that was painted for Tony Yoshida and which, for three decades, presided over the restaurateur's beloved East Village craft cocktail bar. The discrete second-floor bar on Stuyvesant Street opened in 1993 and shuttered nearly thirty years later only to find this West Village reincarnation under the auspices of Tony's daughter Erina, because only family could carefully carry the legacy of no standing, no reservations, no parties greater than four and drinks crafted with the utmost care. I scanned the day's menu for gin cocktails and, after some deliberation with a patient mixologist, selected the Harvest; Roku gin mixed with wine cordial, yogurt and honey, all garnished with a lavender sprig and served up perfectly chilled. I sipped this precursor to autumn in a delicate stemmed coupe glass. I settled in and I cracked the spine of a book because, despite having room for sixty-five – every spot filled, here, I could feel like there was little between me and the page, except for a drink that blurred the outside and sharpened the words.

It was when I began frequenting Angel's Share in its first incarnation that I realized I loved a cocktail. I have never been much of a drinker, and unlikely as it might seem reading this, I'm still not much of one. But the truth is my early drinking was always for other people. Sometime in my teens my best friend and I flung open her father's bar and went at the vodka, just so we could know what we were in for when we had to perform shots for other people. During my first late-night New Year's Eve party, even this preparation was little protection; I spent the better part of the night expunging something spiked. In college I knocked back thick, dark Jägermeister to signal my fearlessness and called my mother in India, complaining of a hangover worse than home sickness. In my early years in New York, I drank to make things palatable from bad techno to long work hours. Later in my twenties, I ordered middling red wine with dinner as a badge of elegance. At one point I drank Remy solely because father had sipped on it while smoking a pipe and later I quit drinking altogether because it felt like a great way to get an alcoholic boyfriend on the wagon. This dry spell ended up lasting a decade in which I didn't miss alcohol at all, because I imagined it was never for me to begin with.

I was well into my thirties before I embraced the joy of sitting at a bar and enjoying a spirit, before I understood that spirits were so named because while emotions might unlock a soul, libations could at least dislodge it. A cocktail became a true indulgence when it was no longer front, cover-up, game, or plea for inclusion and when I found the form in which it offered me maximum pleasure; at a deep bar, pen in hand and book in the span of my palm, or whilst sipping

FROM LEFT: The Swan Room at Nine Orchard; Pebble Bar

a bitter aperitif under an eave with a friend and the tinkle of live music nearby. It was then I began to recognize the taste of juniper berries lending pine and citrus to gin, the flinty minerality of an excellent dry wine and that a Negroni was worthy but a White Negroni was enchanting. My preference was for a cocktail lounge, with a little night music, where the attention to craft extended from the lip of the glass and the shape of the ice to the precise shade of grey that turned a Dirty Martini the color of river water. Without glamorizing addiction, I realized alcohol's lure need not look like Charles Bukowski knocking one back in a cloud of smoke in a dive bar at midday, Cheever downing his eleventh Manhattan or Tennessee Williams in the shadow of Broadway, hip flask at the ready. If whiskey was Hunter Thompson's best muse, one he described as the 'quiet enveloping darkness at the bottom of a bottle of Jim Bean, after a job done any way at all', Jane Austen was more partial to the kind of slow buzz I could appreciate, quipping of the douceurs of an aging that allowed her to be 'chaperon' because, 'I am put on the sofa near the fire and can drink as much as I like'.

Put me on that metaphorical sofa now too and let me conjure a cocktail tour of Manhattan, one that those wordsmiths who were partial to the bottle, women I read keenly, their pages shaping and beguiling me, might have taken.

I imagine Austen time traveling forward and across the Atlantic to be drinking companion to Zelda Fitzgerald, to whom her husband F. Scott Fitzgerald owed much of his success and many of his ideas. Surely Austen would encourage her drinking partner's considerable talents as a writer as she fortified her with spirits? Jane and Zelda might begin a Tuesday night cocktail tour of the Upper East Side at NR. An intimate and unassuming ramen joint with one of the most gorgeous bars in the neighborhood, and possibly in the entire city – gilt-edged with a rocking horse at its center, NR conveys an atmosphere that can be best described as jazz-age exuberance meets eastern charm. It is that rare spot that is transportive even without imbibing, effervescing with the care and attention paid to a tasseled lamp shade, a picture frame-worthy flight of deviled eggs, or the origami swan paperclipped to a cocktail in place of a ubiquitous umbrella. Angel Share alum and NR proprietor Shigefumi 'Shige' Kabashima owns and runs precursor ROKC in West Harlem, which matches NR for having created something both exquisite and original, the kind of place that imbues a city block with charm. He has also developed the small but impeccable list of cocktails in midtown's modern Italian bar, Katherine – worth visiting for that reason alone.

After noodles and Asian Mules laced with cardamom and lime, Jane and Zelda might venture over to Bemelman's, the upscale piano bar in the Carlyle Hotel. This tell-all spot with its gold-leaf ceiling, rose-inflected lighting, playful murals that speak the city's history and maroon banquettes, glows as its musicians sparkle. In its eighth decade, it's younger than Zelda would be, but still old enough to have seen a few things and deliver a signature Manhattan in which the notes of Santa Teresa Rum mingle with orange and Angostura in something close to symphonic. Our literary pair might follow Bemelman's with nightcaps at Jeremy's – a relative newcomer to the east eighties, unassuming only on the outside revealing a sleek room with velvet cubbies and a marbled bar, or at UES a stone's throw away where an ice-cream shop in the front hides a speakeasy in the back; ask the ice cream

STEPHEN KENT JOHNSON; NICOLE FRANZEN;

scooper for the storage room and experience a different world.

My personal uptown favorite, when I'm not craving a side of ramen, has as much to do with vibe as libations, and the vibe I hanker for is distinctly tropical and seductive, a callback to my native Mumbai. Sugar Monk in Harlem is a jewel box of a cocktail bar; a pocket-sized spot with green velvet chairs and banana leaves on the walls. Just blocks from the Apollo Theater, the bar which opened in 2019 from partners Simon Jutras and Ektoras Binikos, seems torn from a page of the Harlem Renaissance and feels like it has always belonged. Here is where I imagine poet, writer, activist, Maya Angelou, deep in conversation with her real-life friend Ada 'Bricktop' Smith, a self-described saloon owner known for her flaming red hair, big voice and vaudevillian dance moves. Angelou worked at Bricktop's club for a time as a singer and later wrote about her in the third volume of her autobiography, Singin' and Swingin' and getting Merry Like Christmas. What would these women say to each other over the modern alchemy that is a Sugar Monk drink fashioned from Binikos' DIY ethos and meticulous work with the forager Tama Matsuoko Wong on amari, bitters, tinctures and liqueurs that span every note from bay leaf to spicy rhubarb? I can only imagine Angelou who wrote from dawn every morning to past midday with, 'a

Bible, a thesaurus, a dictionary and a bottle of sherry' for company, would raise a glass here with reverence. If warming sherry is not your bag, try Sugar Monk's Ma Mandelbaum. Named for crime queen and society hostess Fredericka Mandelbaum, this cocktail swirls citruses and lavender in gin, calling forth the open sky.

Closer to home for me than Sugar Monk, a few blocks from my apartment in Lenox Hill and another tropic-themed escape, is Melody's Piano Bar from the Martignetti brothers, fixtures in New York's restaurant scene.

CLOCKWISE: Bar at Angels Share; Drinks and Honey Toast at Tomi Jazz; Madelines Vesper Cocktail at Bemelmans;

Nines are my go-tos. Tomi Jazz in midtown (the original was part of the Little Tokyo zone of the East Village that included Angel's Share) is a far cry from a space that once catered to Japanese businessmen. Ken Mukohata's underground spot, tucked away amidst the nondescript office blocks of the east fifties, opens into a basement that is as charming as any you will ever see. Here, whilst poring over a read and listening to an enchanting flutist and a glorious sax, I've enjoyed fried oysters and sipped on cool sake in a wooden box. Behind the tiny L-shaped bar, bedecked with dusty liquors and antique lamps, sits a soft-serve machine. As appealing as it seems, I recommend skipping the cone and ordering instead the Honey Toast with ice cream; fat slices of toasted Japanese milk bread drenched in vanilla. For a swankier evening The Nines, a red-velveted supper club in Jon Neidich's former ACME space, is just the ticket and a signal that the spot has grown up. Along with some superb cocktails on offer

KEIICHIRO NAKAJIMA; DANIELA SPECTOR; TOMI JAZZ

is one of New York's most delicious burgers, garnished with black garlic and onions – a great accompaniment to a classic Vieux Carré.

Pebble Bar deserves a mention here too, not least because it is the rare place that makes me feel like old New York can be new again. While not boasting live music, its proximity to Time Square means the sleek lounge welcomes a pre- and post-theater crowd who are all about live performance and just as animated. The third-floor cocktail bar cum dining room hidden betwixt draped windows in a townhouse at Rockefeller Center sits in a location that was once home to Hurley's, the century old Irish saloon. Perhaps that's why, at barely a year old, it already feels like a New York institution and is proof that cocktails in midtown can be a destination affair. Hurley's regulars included Kerouac, Carson and Letterman. But to my mind, Dorothy Parker might have nestled into the corner table at Pebble Bar with her pad and rolled her eyes at them all as she scribbled theater reviews for Vanity Fair, a magazine she claimed had no opinions while she had plenty. Parker, martini in hand, fashioned from her namesake gin, would do well to try one of the bar's flightier cocktails. The Last Waltz – Bombay Sapphire draped with Chartreuse, orange, lime and brine – equal parts sweet and bitter – seems especially fitting for the grande dame of bon mots, who founded the Algonquin roundtable just blocks away.

Parker, who came of drinking age not long before prohibition, once said, 'I like to have a martini, two at the very most, after three I'm under the table, after four I'm under my host'. This didn't stop her from drinking bootleg liquor whilst writing through the night and often sleeping it off most of the day. She went on to write all manner of things; opinion pieces for New Yorker, poetry collections and eventually scripts. I imagine her making her way from Pebble Bar to pen poems at Jac's on Bond in Noho and then across the river to Brooklyn, to Bar Blondeau for a Sunset Fizz and on to Hotel Delmano and Maison Premiere. Between a Delmano Smoke and Flowers (scotch with a heady dash of St Germain, sherry and vermouth) and a Maison Premiere Sazerac (made aromatic with Creole bitters), she would have critiqued her beloved Manhattan at a remove, and well into dawn, before Hollywood came calling for her.

Indeed, two of the best rooms from which to offer a Parker-esque critique of Manhattan's arrivistes, hipster-elites and stealth-wealth aspirants are the city's most undeniably gorgeous cocktail lounges. The Swan Room, part of the luxurious boutique hotel Nine Orchard, arrived in 2022 in the century-old former Jarmulowsky Bank building on Canal and Orchard, a stunning but crumbling Beaux-Arts structure that has thankfully been revitalized with immaculate attention to old details. The Swan Room lobby bar is the jewel in the crown of the structure, proffering a majestically high ornamental ceiling which is

FROM TOP: The Cocktail Bar at NR; Cocktails at NR

the only thing that could pull your eyes from a sumptuous bar that is all marbled swirls and old-world sophistication. This is a room that, despite all those who want to hate on the culture-stripping of the lower east side, would have made Gertrude Stein blush with pleasure. I was a virgin to White Negronis before my first here; Suze, Lillet Blanc, gin and lemon peel with a dash of something proprietary which made it perfectly herbaceous, daintily floral and impossible to replicate. Undeniably the kind of drink that deserves to be garnished with a delicate leaf and offered up on a heavy-bottomed tray by a server in a white jacket and bow tie.

Overstory in the Financial district swaps the Swan Room's opulence for the abundance of riches that comes with unencumbered sightlines. Located on the sixty-fourth floor of 70 Pine Street with a three-sixty-degree wraparound terrace, Overstory is a spot from which the city unfurls languorously in every direction. In spite of this, the rose-hued bar is magnetic and, with its handful of seats, manages to feel cozy and tranquil whilst the outdoor tables are a Manhattan oasis. Overstory comes from the Crown Shy and SAGA teams, restaurants that have imbued their fine dining ethos with a warm hospitality and it shows even in this perch elevated atop the city, thanks in large part to beverage director Harrison Ginsberg's penchant for keeping things grounded. The deceptively straightforward cocktails and their no-buzz counterparts are the liquid equivalent of meticulous farm-to-table cooking where each ingredient shines. The In The Clouds – whiskey, earl grey, vanilla, champagne and clarified milk – will carry you to the other side of sublime.

Still, there are the misfits who would have shunned these vaunted rooms as hotbeds of clicking heels and heavy wristwatches. Those writers who wrote the literal hell out of their women and men. Jean Rhys, the writer that had the greatest impact on me as a teen via her brief and visceral re-imagining of Jane Eyre's 'mad woman in the attic' – Rochester's Caribbean-born wife, would, if she moved across the Atlantic, have settled on a part of Lower East Side that retained a trace of grime as her haunt of choice. England was Rhys' adoptive country and one that never really embraced a woman who grew up in Dominica, part Welsh, part Scots-Creole and, as the Brits would insinuate, all mongrel. She would surely find solace in a part of the city once known largely for its population of immigrants and, after doing the rounds of its back door cocktail lounges – Please Don't Tell, The Back Room, Death and Company – she might settle on one that has become at once mythic and discrete.

Attaboy, a bar in the small space that more than ten years ago was home to Milk and Honey, forerunner of the craft cocktail movement, is a menu-less space where you speak your mood and the bartender artfully mixes it into a tumbler. Rhys who declared, 'I have decided on a place to eat in at midday, a place to eat in at night, a place to have my drink in after dinner. I have arranged my little life,' could have felt at home here; undoubtedly the warm, dimly lit bar would fit the bill. For a drinking companion, my money is on Marguerite Duras joining Rhys in Attaboy's nether reaches where a clutch of forest green leather booths disappears into the back. Duras, who called alcoholism 'scandalous in a woman...a slur on the divine our nature', embraced it, nonetheless. Like Rhys, she was a post-colonial writer who made her way back to her own French imperial motherland only

NR

CLOCKWISE: Overstory; Dante West Village; Masahiro Urushido Serving Up Cocktails at Katana Kitten

to experience an unforeseen dislodging of her birthplace, French Indochina, now Vietnam. Sipping bourbon, vermouth and woodsy amaro over single hunks of ice at Attaboy, could there be a better duo to dissect the politics of location and the even more political displacement of women who make unconventional decisions?

Amor Y Amargo, a few blocks up from Attaboy, is another place I return to in the East Village, largely because of its pioneering focus on bitters. In its distinctly masculine and enveloping recesses, I can see a different pair of misfits – Patricia Highsmith and Shirley Jackson, engaged in the kind of straight-talking banter that is as clean as their sentences. Both women liked to drown their ideas and their sorrows in tipple, perhaps because it aided them in masking life's cruel yet mundane eventualities behind the crime and horror stories they trafficked in. These don't-give-a-damn women did meet at least once in real life; Highsmith accompanied a friend to coffee at the apartment Jackson shared with her husband, but they would have done better to raise glasses at Amor Y Amargo's eight-seater bar. Barman's Sother Teague's application of bitters to bring out hidden depths in any drink is something that sets his creations apart, making his spot a necessary stop on any cocktail lovers map. Over bevvies laced with aromatic, floral or musky bitters Highsmith could stack her charismatic men against Jackson's brooding women – have Tessie Hutchinson give Tom Ripley a run for his money. Both writers' protagonists were tinged by a self-hatred rooted, no doubt, in fractious relationships the authors had with their mothers and their partners – women who left her for men in Highsmith's case and a husband whose infidelities Jackson put up with through gritted teeth. A watering hole attune to complexity and ahead of the curve seems only fitting for fire and brimstone women who wrote their way into a celebrity that would balloon posthumously, so defiantly were they ahead of their times.

And what of their more overtly delicate sisters-in-arms – the poetesses? Where would Anne Sexton clink a glass with her contemporary, Sylvia Plath? More than a birthplace, a poetry workshop, and later a psychiatric hospital, these two shared an uncanny ability to make their poems sing, groan, beg, urge and haunt. Perhaps Elizabeth Bishop, a generation older and likely capable of drinking them both under the table, would chaperone them through the speakeasys of Nomad and Chelsea, beginning with Raines Law Room and moving on to Patent Pending, one tucked in a basement, the other behind a coffee shop, both delectable. The neighborhood has become something of a cocktail bar destination, other highlights include Thyme and Apotheke, but my guess is these Massachusetts-bred women would do well to trade industrial chic for the West Village's leafy streets, cheering their still-water exteriors and breaking their depressive spells, if only for a single sun-kissed evening.

Dante, a name that is over a century and a few facelifts old began with the original Caffe Dante on Macdougal street in Greenwich Village and has since – in 2020, opened a West Village location that, all minty window frames decked with fresh flowers, is one of the prettiest bars in a neighborhood sprawling with them and a haven of aperitifs. Its latest iteration might include some of the finest cocktails in its hundred-and-four-year-old history. You could do worse than beginning an evening with a Dante's Mezcalito, a hibiscus infused mezcal affair mingled with Contratto aperitif, pale and dark vermouths and a cherry liqueur.

Tipsy with Mezcal,our trio might stroll a few blocks from Dante to Katana Kitten for nibbles, tunes and more fortification. Masahiro Urushido's spot smacks of Osaka underground and riffs on Japanese influences like Fumio Nanri on his best night. Open since 2018, Katana has since landed on a number of best-of lists and deserves every last drop of the hype. Here, I envision Bishop raising a Toki Highball to Plath's El Camino and Sexton's Meguroni. The dry vermouth in the Camino would blissfully sate Plath's penchant for sherry while retaining a feel of summer from the iichiko shochu, green tea and cucumber. The Meguroni (I seem to search for a variation on the classic everywhere I go) is deeper, blending shochu with Caffo Red Bitter, but still easy, drawing in the yuzu, grapefruit and mint notes of kinome leaves. Both drinks make excellent use of umeshu, a Japanese liqueur made from steeping ume for a wonderful stone-fruit depth that is as round and full on the palate as the one-bite plums it is named for. What Katana Kitten does just as artfully is blend the delicacy that the Japanese are known for with a punch, not just of its liquors but of bold music, fat decapitated shrimp appetizers, a banging teriyaki burger on a fluffy potato bun and the vibrant red shiso leaves grown in Urushido's own Brooklyn garden. Katana Kitten has nailed the contradiction implied in its name – a reference to the samurai's sword, paired with a feline softness. I can't think of anything more fitting for three warrior poets who wielded words with the cat-like agility of fencers.

And for a nightcap, well they could end up right where we started, just steps from Katana at Angel's Share, under the mural. After all, isn't it in that liminal space, where spirit becomes vapour, that the word truly begins to dance on the page?

SOLEIL NATHWANI *is a New York-based Culture Writer and Film Critic. A former Film Executive and Hedge Fund COO, Soleil hails from London and Mumbai.*

NATALIE BLACK; GIADA PAOLONI; ALEX KIKIS

ANKUR TEWARI'S MULTI-FACETED MUSICAL LIFE

From curating music for the rebranded *Coke Studio Bharat*, to launching a new solo album, and scoring music for the upcoming film The Archies, it has been a busy year for the singer-songwriter

By ANURAG TAGAT

Creative Lead : SIDDHI CHAVAN | Content Strategy: RUTH MOHINANI | Brand Solutions: SUSHANT ISHWARKAR
Photographer: PRARTHNA SINGH | Stylist: MEHMA TIBB | Outfits: A DS4E5RSENIC BY MEHMA TIBB
Styling Assistant: SHUBHANI SHETTY | Dress Man: SHAKIR SHAIKH
Artist Management: NAYANTARA KUMAR, SAVINAY SHETTY, PRUTHVI DHAWALE, MISFITS INC.

GOOD LUCK CAFÉ, a typical Mumbai-style Irani restaurant near Bandra's historic Mehboob Studio, is a favorite haunt for Ankur Tewari. The informal seating and the anonymity here helps him enjoy sitting with strangers of various stripes, talking to them and listening in on their conversations. " If you go and have chai there, you can easily drop into these people's conversations and hear so much," he says excitedly, "You get exposed to so many lives. I like the idea that you can share your table with someone you don't know. It's very intimate when you sit across the table and talk to even strangers. It's kind of in sync with my life."

Tewari lives in Bandra and much of what he does revolves around here (including the cover photography for this article was done on his building terrace). Good Luck Café in that sense is an integral part of his life. It has provided him rich material for the many songs he has written for himself and others, and of course his work as a poet. Songs like "Parwaana"—the opening track of his new album *Akela*—are drawn from his time here. "I don't know if it's entirely true, but I remember vaguely a person talking about the love of their life and how they will go to any extent to be with their love. I don't know if the whole song is from there, but one part of the emotion comes from a conversation I had at Good Luck," he says.

The psychedelic and brooding *Akela* with its eight tracks is Tewari's first full-fledged album in more than a decade, notwithstanding an occasional EP or his work as a lyricist for other singers. It comes at a very hectic period in his career. He is currently at work on the second season of the Coke Studio Bharat where he is designated as the 'creative architect'. And then there is his work on a growing list of films and OTT shows where he is designated as the 'music supervisor'. The term is a new one, signifying the evolutionary change underway in the near century old history of Indian film music. The old-style, all-encompassing music director who composed every song in the movie as well as the background score, is slowly making way for the 'music supervisor' whose job is essentially to curate a collection of independently produced songs by a diverse range of singers and musicians that fits in with the theme of the film.

Tewari hit the big time as music supervisor with Zoya Akhtar's 2019 film *Gully Boy*, loosely based on the hardscrabble growing up days in suburban Mumbai of Indian rap pioneers Naezy and DIVINE. The critically acclaimed movie was a landmark in the history of Indian popular culture, not just because it transformed the likes of DIVINE, Naezy, Sez on the Beat, MC Altaf, MC TodFod, Emiway Bantai, KR$NA, Brodha V and others into national superstars, but also in the way it transformed Indian language hip-hop into, arguably, the most successful genre of music in the country since the time in the Eighties and Nineties when Biddu Appiah made 'indipop' a national craze with the likes of Nazia and Zoheb Hassan, Alisha Chinai and others.

Gully Boy proved to be a transformational film for Tewari. His friendship with Zoya Akhtar proved to be serendipitous. As he told *The Telegraph* in 2019, "When she approached me, I knew that it

would be challenging but good fun and I'd have some learning from the project as I went with it." But he was a musician imbued more in the rock, so how was he going to do justice to a movie about rap? There was a lot of "homework" involved, as he recounted in a 2019 interview. "I, frankly, had no idea about the scope of work and the fact that I would be collaborating with so many musicians. I just went with the flow and we almost worked one-and-a-half to two years on the music and it ended up being a big collaboration," he said. Playing festivals across India, Tewari had shared green rooms and backstage banter with hip-hop artists, which he says made him curious about the rap scene, especially the gully rap of Mumbai which proved to be crucial in his work as the curator.

"EVEN WHEN I WAS IN SCHOOL, MY DREAM HAS ALWAYS BEEN TO BE IN A BAND"

The film opened doors for him to work as music supervisor in a variety of films and OTT shows over the next few years, including *Modern Love: Mumbai*, *Gehraiyaan*, *A Suitable Boy*, *Yeh Ballet*, *Made in Heaven* and others. As with *Gully Boy*, some of these films proved to be career making projects for some of the musicians who worked for him. *Gehraiyaan*, for example, was the break-out film for composer-producer and composer duo OAFF and Savera.

Tewari's early success of course was, with his own band The Ghalat Family. Formed in 2009, they've gone beyond Hindi rock band cliches to become one of Indian indie's most beloved bands with hits like "Mohabbat Zindabad" and pull off spirited tunes like "Sabse Peeche Hum Khade." The band is still going strong with multi-instrumentalist Sidd Coutto, bassist Johan Pais, guitarist Gaurav Gupta and drummer Vivaan Kapoor. Tewari as the frontman continues to be the face, comfortable on stage, joking with the crowd while goading them to sing along.

His major musical digressions in the early part of last year coincide with the gradual blurring of boundaries between India's indie scene and mainstream music industry. From his stint at music channel *Pepsi MTV Indies* (which helped bring in artists for *Gully Boy*) to co-founding poetry platform Kommune, and now *Coke Studio Bharat*, his skill has been at finding the right artists for the right song. "Even when I was in school, my dream has always been to be in a band and work with other musicians, and *Coke Studio Bharat* puts me in a very interesting place where I can work with musicians I probably wouldn't have collaborated with myself," he says.

It's great for one's personal growth, Tewari believes, to be surrounded by everyone, from folk musicians to singer-songwriters to electronic producers and hip-hop artists, often in the same room, considering the

scale and ambition of *Coke Studio Bharat*. From OAFF, Savera, Jasleen Royal, and Burrah kicking off with "Udja" to seasonal songs like "Holi Re Rasiya" with Ravi Kishan, Amaan, and Ayaan Ali Bangash and Seedhe Maut, to "Khalasi" with Aditya Gadhvi, Achint, and Dhruv Visvanath, and more, the collaborations in the first season, early this year, were carefully stacked to avoid the pitfalls of having too many cooks in the kitchen.

Historically, this is what had made Coke Studio in India a hit or miss across seasons, showrunners, producers and curators in its initial four-year run from 2012 to 2015. The show which was originally conceived in Brazil in 2007, had became a big part of Indian musical consciousness via the massive success of the Pakistani version produced by the redoubtable Rohail Hyatt, which Indian fans feasted on YouTube. So it wasn't surprising that Coke would launch a local version in India sooner than later.

Composer-singer Leslie Lewis (from indi-pop act Colonial Cousins) was the curator and producer of the first season of the Indian edition. Since then, producers and curators have included the likes of A.R. Rahman, Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy, Ram Sampath, Salim-Sulaiman, Clinton Cerejo, Amit Trivedi, Sachin-Jigar, etc.

The four seasons that *Coke Studio India* ran allowed indie artists, underappreciated folk heroes, and Bollywood hitmakers to come together in a way that hadn't been seen before. The Wadali Brothers, The Nooran Sisters, Kutle Khan, Mame Khan jammed with Papon, Kailash Kher, Sona Mohapatra, Raftaar, Vijay Prakash, Siddharth Basrur, Pentagram, Agam and Advaita, among scores of others, spurring powerful compositions that launched a few careers in the music industry. The producers and curators were at the center of it all, treating each song release like an all-star project.

After a hiatus of eight years, the show made a come back earlier this year, with a new home on YouTube (it was on MTV earlier) and re-branded as Coke Studio Bharat. Tewari with his experience working with cross genre musicians was in some ways the obvious choice as the curator."[It's great] to just be a fly on the wall and see how people are operating, be part of the discussions when they create a song together," he says.

Like Coke Studio Bharat, Tewari's upcoming project as the music supervisor, lyricist and composer for Zoya Akhtar's soon to be released *The Archies* has been a collective endeavor for Tewari. Based on the iconic Archies comics, it is set the year 1964 in an Anglo-Indian community. Tewari deep dived into the Anglo-Indian culture of that time to conceive of the music for the film. "I started researching about the music that was happening in India at that time, tried to find some recordings, tried to find bands, and interviewed many people. And the palette emerged from there and it's very exciting," he says.

The Archies provided him the opportunity to work with Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy who have composed the main tracks for the film. "Because I love their music so much" he says, he was "very nervous" working with then. But the ease they brought to the project, he says, melted away the anxieties. "They never made me feel as lesser at any point. They made me feel like home and they are such good collaborators," he adds. He likens watching the trio in action in the studio as "energy bunnies", just throwing ideas and collating them. It was their non-verbal cues though which amazed Tewari. "I think the three of them can read each other's minds very well. There was some telepathic stuff happening between them," he says with a laugh.

Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy not withstanding, Tewari is credited as the music supervisor, lyricist, and composer for the film, for the numerous tracks that he has produced. He put together a band for the film called The Islanders featuring drummer Jehangir Jehangir, bassist Nathan Thomas, guitarist Zohran Miranda, saxophonist Rhys Sebastian, and vocalists Aria Nanji. "Tejas' voice just matched Archies' personality, played by Agastya [Nanda], while Shivam Mahadevan is the voice of Jughead. Overall, the soundtrack makes you feel easy, it makes you think about simpler times and easier days, especially with how the world is right now. It like really feels like a warm hug," he says.

For Tewari his work on films, which started nearly 20 years ago on a largely forgotten move called *Let's Enjoy* in 2004 is a about staying relevant in the moment. "Sometimes in life, my biggest fear is being

"THE IDEA IS TO TELL A STORY THAT IS RELATABLE NOW"

irrelevant as an artist, which is an actual reality, because there is nobody who stays relevant forever. The idea is to try and keep up with the times, trying to understand what's happening, and tell the story of now. Specifically, try and tell a story that is relatable now," he says.

Born in 1977 in Brussels to a father who is a metallurgist and engineer and a mother who came from a drama background, Tewari grew up in Roorkee and Bhopal before eventually working in hospitality in New Delhi and moving to Mumbai for music. "To be very honest, I'm only very good at this and this is something that gives me a smile at the end of the day," he says, "I studied in the hotel industry, I tried to be a hotelier but I realized very early that I wouldn't be a good hotelier and I'm not enjoying it more than anything else."

His love for the arts, he says, came from watching his mother directing student plays as part of the dramatics society at Roorkee University. He saw actors prep, rehearse, make costumes and stage sets and get on stage. "That definitely was something very important for me to ever feel the urge to be on stage myself. I think it started there," Tewari says. His first experience as a singer came after he became part of his school choir. And he hasn't stopped singing since.

He is as passionate about music, as he was when he first started out. "I'm really having fun. It feels like you're in an amusement park and you're taking this ride and that ride, and overall having fun. As long as that's going, I'll keep going." The admission price to be at this amusement park, according to Tewari, is to "pay in patience." "Sometimes you don't get instant returns so you have to be very grounded, because the moment you fly, you also have to be prepared to come crashing down. It's full of thrills. If you see it as a game, it can be exciting. If you take it seriously, then it can be very scary. So I never try and take my career so seriously that I start getting nervous or be scared. I keep on reminding myself to keep having enjoying the fun that comes with it."

Tewari doesn't like to talk about dividing music into genres. When asked about the stylistic choices that made *Akela* a psychedelic, sometimes dark trip that is rich in textures and ambient elements, Tewari says his advice to singer-songwriters is just "follow the story." "For me, I don't like to say, 'I write these kind of songs.' Genres, for me, are made by people who sell music. It's good that music needs to be sold, but when you're approaching songwriting, you don't think like you're writing a singer-songwriter song, or you're writing a ballad, or you're writing a rock anthem, or an EDM track, you just write after you've felt the story."

He admits he's bad at multi-tasking, so prefers to immerse himself in one particular project at a time, whether it's his own material or working with other artists for screen or otherwise. To that end, Tewari is reluctant to share any details about the next season of *Coke Studio Bharat*. All he would say is that it is targeted at the current generation of young India, in all its diversity. "What we're trying to do with *Coke Studio Bharat* is tell the story of the new, emerging India, which has the youngest people in the world. I feel that we need to talk about stories and pain points that the young are feeling, and yet have a dose of tradition in it," he says. The goal, he says, is to make traditional music cool, but also write new stories in different forms that could become 'folk music 2.0'. "Bob Dylan was writing 'Blowin' In The Wind' when the Vietnam War was happening. I want to write about our times through our folk and with the voices of the young, " he adds.

REPRESENT's Songwriting Camp at Kaiã Goa Served as A Creative Haven for Artists

A MIX OF PRODUCERS AND SINGERS SUCH AS OAFF, KAYAN, KAMAKSHI KHANNA, LISA MISHRA AND MORE ATTENDED THE FOUR-DAY RETREAT

By David Britto

LAST MONTH, talent management agency REPRESENT organized a songwriting camp for its artists at the relaxed and scenic Kaiã Goa overlooking the majestic Ashvem Beach in the idyllic state between September 11th to the 14th.

We found ourselves on the same flight from Mumbai to Goa with some of the artists heading to the camp and after a two-hour delay at the airport, we were finally on our way. After being greeted with top-notch hospitality from the Kaiã Goa staff, we settled into our respective and very lush rooms before heading back out to get a sense of what was to come.

Due to the artists arriving late because of the delayed flights, day one began at dinner time with some of the artists having not met before getting to know each other. Present around the dinner table were the likes of singers and producers such as Lisa Mishra, Kamakshi Khanna, Saahel, The Rish, Jai Dhir, Akanksha Bhandari, Riz Shain, Kimeraa and Somanshu Agarwal. To break the ice, Mishra proceeded to ask everyone what they were currently listening to while Saahel and Dhir sang stuff they were working on to each other. Even though some of the artists were tired from the long day of traveling, they set up mini studios at the Kaiã Villa and divided themselves into groups and stayed up late to begin work on new music.

The next morning, we went in to hear what was cooking at the camp. In one room you had Khanna, Bhandari, Saahel and Rutvik Talashilkar stirring up a pop-soul track. There was plenty of vocalizing going on as Khanna was coming up with vocal parts on the fly. Over in room two, Mishra, The Rish and Agarwal were putting in parts on a fresh track, one that Mishra said had a "rich sound." The trio were bonding well with each other as they were working on something that was in the sonic space they thrive in. They would also celebrate like a team scoring a goal whenever a good part came together.

Room three saw Dhir, Riz, Kimeraa and Kanishk Seth join forces. The quartet were creating a quirky juxtaposition of sounds that melded meditative music with drum and bass. The outcome of which instantly clicked and made for quite the earworm. The artists spent a lot of time moving sections around and seeing what works best while they also discussed what digital audio workstations (DAWs) they like best. Although the artists began working in certain groups, each of them would jump into other sessions to ideate and bring in a fresh pair of ears. For example, Saahel came into room three to add mouth percussion parts to the meditative D&B track.

After a quick lunch break where we got to feast on the tasty Kaiã Goa menu, the artists went back for more sessions in the evening. The evening also saw artists such as Yashraj, OAFF and Kayan – who just returned from her gig in Seoul – join the party. We caught a bit of Bhandari and Yashraj lay-down vocals on

COURTESY OF REPRESENT

"When in every room, there's somebody else creating something, you just walk in and you get inspired. I see this as a big win for all the artists here," says OAFF.

a slick production from Riz. As the day came to a close, we noticed that there were inputs galore from each artist across the sessions with every one of them taking in suggestions without a fuss, which made for a wholly collaborative experience.

We began day three by sitting in on a session that OAFF and Kayan were working on. The pair were refining a track they kickstarted the previous night. Both artists were pushing each other lyrically and also joking about some of the lyrics they were coming up with. While the song started off smoothly, they did hit a bit of a brick wall when it came around to the second verse. However, after a bit of probing, they were eventually able to come through with something they liked. The song included an early 2000s house music dance-pop vibe which suited Kayan's silky vocals to the tee.

While a lot of the groundwork went into day one and day two of the camp, by this time the artists were a bit more relaxed and took in time to soak in some Goa vibes. REPRESENT and Kaiã Goa also organised a sundowner with cocktails for the artists to unwind which also saw Kimeraa and Kayan take turns in spinning tunes over at the DJ deck.

On the fourth and final day of the camp, one could tell that by this point some of the artists were tired from long late-night sessions and constantly having to be plugged in to create something. With about 23 songs coming out of the 18 sessions over the course of the camp, we caught up with the artists to find out what their experience was like attending something like this.

Bhandari says, "It was a very new experience because I've never worked like this before. I write my own music, but sitting with such amazing producers, singers, composers and writers, it's been a great learning experience for me. I'm super inspired to write more music and collaborate with different musicians." She adds, "And this camp, I think it's a great opportunity for all of us to get together and be friends also and know each other so that we can work together in the future. It's been exciting."

Khanna spoke about how normally when it comes to songwriting, she isolates herself and does things on her own. However, she says, "This camp was exactly what I needed to understand that working with other people just changes your approach so much. It just makes your song so much bigger. I'm really excited to explore this new chapter of my writing process, which is working with producers who have a very large understanding of what you want your sound to be."

On his part, Riz talked about being entertained by the wealth of talent on show at the camp. Kayan says, "I think collaborations that are probably going to be super surprising to people have happened here and that is really wonderful. It's been super exciting to work with so many different artists and the fact that we're all put in a place and we get to just make music together without any stress, without any worries is awesome."

The youngest member at the camp, Saahel, says, "This has been an experience of getting to learn and get to know what my sound is and what I want to make. So I've really come to a realization that this is my thing." Rutvik adds, "Just being here seemed extremely special only because there are so many different people with so many different energies, tastes, experiences and adventures. I'm trying to bring in my sort of energy to this and collaborate with people around me so that it becomes a euphoric situation."

For OAFF, he comes from a similar space as Khanna wherein he's usually working alone or in a very small team. He says, "It's nice to work with new people. I learned a lot of things. First of all, when in every room, there's somebody else creating something, you just walk in and you get inspired. I see this as a big win for all the artists here."

Overall, it was a common understanding that each artist who attended the camp definitely walked away inspired, liberated and wanting to create much more. A super initiative by REPRESENT and Kaiã Goa in putting something like this together, hopefully, there will be more such songwriting camps in the future to help artists not only get together and make music but also form communities to help the music scene grow further in India.

DAUGHTRY ON NEW MUSIC, THE RISE OF AI, INDIA AND MO RE

THE AMERICAN ROCK BAND'S FRONTMAN CHRIS DAUGHTRY OPENS UP ABOUT THE BAND'S FIRST PIECE OF NEW MUSIC IN TWO YEARS

By David Britto

DOVE SHORE

LAST MONTH, American rock band Daughtry released new music for the first time since their 2021 sixth studio album *Dearly Beloved*. The group's latest offering is the anthemic single "Artificial." We caught up with the band's frontman Chris Daughtry in this exclusive interview with *Rolling Stone India* and talked about the new song, how AI is impacting our lives, his love for India, the group's upcoming album and more. Read below.

You're currently on an acoustic U.S. tour with the band, where are you right now?
I'm in Seattle and it's been a nice day off. It's been kind of chill, we went to Bruce Lee and Brandon Lee's grave today. So that was pretty cool.

Have you been a fan of them?
Oh yeah, big time. *The Crow* was a huge part of my childhood and then of course I got into Bruce Lee after the fact actually. I obviously knew who Bruce Lee was, but I was too young when those movies came out, so I had to kind of go back and get my learn on with *Enter The Dragon* and *Game of Death* and stuff. But yeah, I've always been a huge martial arts fan in general though. That was a pretty cool moment today.

Your new song "Artificial" is the first piece of new music for the band in two years, what have the last two years been like for you?
A lot of touring. A lot of life, some great, some not so great and we've been doing a lot of writing for the new record and we're back on tour now. So, the record is nowhere close to being finished, but once we wrap this tour up, we'll get back in the studio and get back to it.

Coming to "Artificial" — what can you tell me about the song itself?
Lyrically it's very impending doom, there's not a lot of hope lyrically in it. It's definitely painting the worst-case scenario of artificial intelligence and we've all seen *Terminator*, you know what I mean? It's very much kind of inspired by the idea of man creates a machine, machine destroys man, the end. Obviously, that's the worst-case scenario.

But you know, we were kind of just in the studio talking about it and it started with casual conversations about ChatGPT and just all the things that are happening at a very rapid rate with AI and I think a couple of days later, my producer Scott [Stevens] came to the studio and was like, 'Dude, you know how we were just talking about all this stuff that's happening.' He said his wife had dinner with her friends, who happened to be AI coders and it's way worse than we thought. The stuff that's being developed is way crazier than we thought.

It gave him this idea for this riff. And I think we wrote something about becoming artificial. Why don't we just write the song called 'Artificial' and he played the riff and we instantly just started spitballing lyrical ideas. I think AI in and of itself isn't inherently bad. Obviously, just like social media isn't inherently bad, but I think social media can be used for good, It can be used to destroy and I think our kind of goal was to kind of just bring awareness to like, 'Hey, this is this is happening, it's not going anywhere. This is what could happen if we're not responsible.' Now mind you, I'm no pro on artificial intelligence. It's more of an outsider's perspective of the way I see it.

"'Artificial' is very impending doom, there's not a lot of hope lyrically in it. It's definitely painting the worst-case scenario of artificial intelligence."

As an outsider looking in, AI has kind of entered the music world as well. There are songs being made using AI. What are your thoughts on that?
I say use it to create cures for cancer and to create new limbs or generate new organs. You know to save lives. Let's leave art alone. Let's not recreate someone's voice. I'm sure Johnny Cash would be rolling over in his grave if he knew his voice was being used to sing 'Barbie Girl.' I think you got to draw the line somewhere.

The music video for "Artificial" is a visual treat — what was it like putting it together?
Thank you. It was a lot of fun. I had this idea loosely inspired by *Terminator*. Of course, it's pretty obvious that we were inspired by that and our producer, Scott Stevens, his wife worked in film and she helped put this team together to create this vision that I had. To see it through and everybody who worked on this video who were so invested in it and creating this really cool piece of art, we're all super proud. We used this really cool technology called Unreal Engine to kind of create the environment around us. So it wasn't just being in front of a green screen. We got to kind of feel the vibe of this post-apocalyptic world around us. It was a lot of fun and shooting the lab scenes were probably the most fun. Just because we're using all practical effects and it kind of reminded me of all those movies that I watched growing up like *Terminator*. I love all that stuff. So, I thought it was really cool to incorporate that.

You mentioned that you're working on a new album. What can you tell me about it?
We still have a ways to go and we still have to get the guys to come in and play their parts. A lot of it's in like demo phase right now and we had about five or six songs written before 'Artificial' came along. And when we wrote that it was just like, we kind of knew. It was one of those moments where we were like, this feels like this is fresh. This feels like we need to do this now and we got everybody in and recorded their parts. We leaned in really hard on getting that track done. In the past, we've recorded songs and then we'd be really excited about it. By the time the record would come out and we'd finally get that song out or the whole record, it feels like some of the excitement may have been lost. So, we just felt like this felt too exciting to sit on it and wait for the record to be done. Let's put it out now and give the fans something new to kind of chew on while we're working on the record.

I'm not sure if you're aware but you have a big following in India, tons of fans right from your *American Idol* days. Have you ever been approached to perform in India?
I did not know that we had a big fan base in India. I've never been. I would absolutely love to go to India. It's one of the places that I've always wanted to go. Everything I've ever heard about it, I want to experience it for myself. I love Indian food. It's my favorite food ever. We used to have some neighbors and they would tell us stories about India. And I was just like, 'Oh man, this sounds so beautiful. I want to go.' We've never to my knowledge had an offer to come over there. But we would absolutely love it.

How is the current run of shows on tour going?
It's funny because we released the heaviest song of our career right as we are doing an acoustic tour. It's full band but it's stripped-down acoustic, and it's been really fun and even playing 'Artificial' acoustic, it's going over incredibly. It's a very different version of it, but it's really cool and very kind of creepy. Kind of has a Halloween vibe to it, but it's been a lot of fun just to kind of sit down and play all these songs we're playing. You know, a few of the songs from the first record. We've got about two more weeks and then we're pretty much wrapped for the year and back to making a record.

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Reviews

Music

MEXICAN AMERICAN POP'S '200%' MOMENT

Becky G and DannyLux bridge cultures and make history on two great new LPs

By JULYSSA LOPEZ

Becky G
Esquinas
Kemosabe/Sony Latin/RCA

DannyLux
DLux
Warner Latina

It's often the case that children of immigrants, especially Latino ones, learn to balance two cultures from a young age. Frequently, they navigate dual worlds, with one foot firmly planted in the place where they've grown up, the other fastened in their parents' homeland — resulting in what can feel like being split in half, caught between double the amount of traditions and customs and pop-culture references.

But lately, a younger generation has been recasting complex bicultural identities as the lucky inheritance of "200-percenters," kids who are proudly 100 percent Latino and 100 percent American. The description was on Becky G's →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Carolina Rodríguez Fuenmayor

BECKY G AND DANNYLUX

mind when she began recording her latest album, *Esquinas,* a gorgeous exploration of what it means to be Mexican American — and how it's shaped who she is as a pop star and as a person. The title, which means "corners," captures the intersection of two cultures. It's also an endearing nod to her upbringing in Inglewood, California, where she recalls shops and restaurants being "just at *la esquinita*" — "right at the corner."

But the album also represents a long artistic journey. Becky G, who got her start making pop in English, fully embraces the richness of Mexican genres, teaming up with producer Edgar Barrera
for a profound examination of the music's significance to her and the generations that came before. It's a full-circle moment: She's become an elder stateswoman for a new movement of kids who have been taking Mexican sounds to new, global heights. In 2023, artists like Grupo Frontera, Peso Pluma, and Eslabon Armado have shot to Number One on Spotify's Global charts — Becky even brought out Pluma during her ode to Mexican heritage at Coachella.

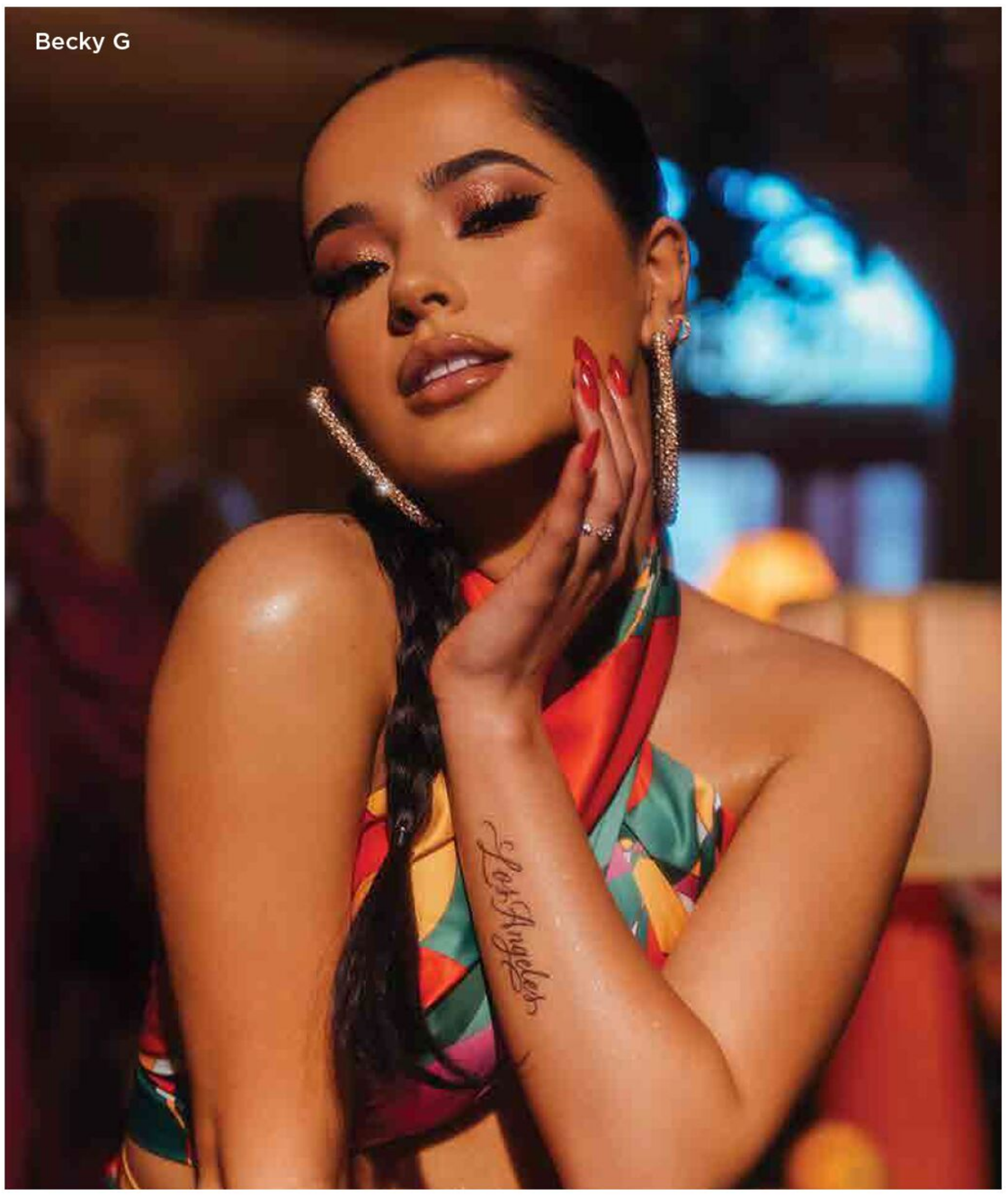
On *Esquinas,* no song comes across derivative or pastiche. "2ndo Chance" is a ballad dipped in nostalgic synths that morphs into a brooding acoustic burner with Gen Z heartthrob Ivan Cornejo. Other collaborations include a stunning show of vocal acrobatics with Yahritza Y Su Esencia and a tender moment with ranchera royalty Angela Aguilar. But it's on "Querido Abuelo," a shattering tribute to her late grandfather, that she lays out the heart of this project: "I want you to know it's an honor to represent your bloodline."

When Becky G was just an elementary school kid, living out the memories that are all over *Esquinas,* DannyLux was a baby, born in the Coachella Valley to parents from Mexicali, Mexico. His father drove garbage trucks for a company that actually used to clean the grounds of the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival every year; on one of his daily routes around the area, he happened to find a guitar that he brought home and gave to Danny when he was about seven years old.

That was Danny's first guitar, the one with which he began unlocking the honeyed sound that's all over his latest album, *DLux*. It's his third full-length release since breaking out on TikTok as a sweet, sentimental player in the growing música Mexicana scene. It comes just after Danny played at Coachella, exactly where his father worked years ago, and while he's been making a name for himself as a rising star. (Coincidentally, he's also featured on Becky's new album.)

While most of Danny's previous projects have plunged into a full range of Mexican styles, *DLux* casts a wider net, letting Danny drift into Americana, bachata, bossa nova, and more. He teams up with Jordyn Shellhart, a satin-voiced vocalist from Nashville, for "La Lluvia," a gentle duet that highlights the long-standing connection between country and Mexican music. "Decir Adios," a woozy daydream with whimsical wunderkind Cuco, suggests there are experimental depths Danny wants to discover.

Still, the foundation of this record is the sad sierreños that Danny's so adept at writing. Though he grew up in California, his lyrics are in Spanish, and his verses are carefully observed and intensely felt. Like Becky, he shows that no matter what he's doing, he's pulling from deep-seated roots that continue to find unexpectedly beautiful new ways to bloom. ®

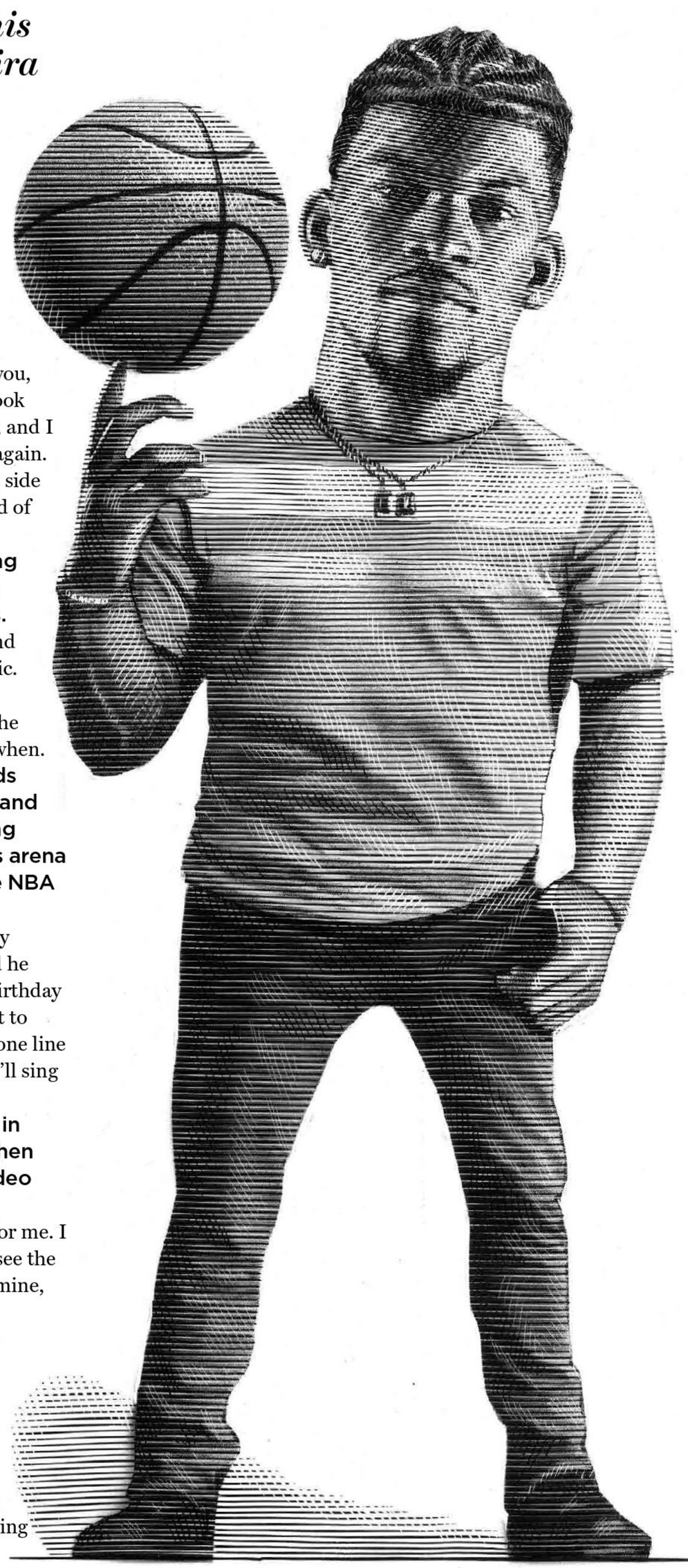

Becky G

DannyLux

FROM LEFT: RCA RECORDS; RVIN RIVERA/GETTY IMAGES

Jimmy Butler

The NBA star on country music, his friend Morgan Wallen, and Shakira



What have been the highlights of your offseason Unexpected Tour in China?
It's just incredible to know that somebody even knows my name on that side of the world. But the best thing is I've been able to grow my dad skills. I'm getting really good at this dad thing.

Butler is a forward for the Miami Heat.

When did you first fall in love with country music?
My senior year at Marquette everyone in the locker room was listening to Lil Wayne and Jay-Z, and I love the hip-hop world as well, but I kept telling them to turn the music down. They said, "Worry about what's in your headphones." So I went home and googled, "What's the most country song?" The first song that came up is "Don't Take the Girl," by Tim McGraw. I blared that song in the locker room. Then, I listened to the lyrics and learned about more country singers. So I went from Tim McGraw to Faith Hill to Brad Paisley to Kenny Chesney to Trisha Yearwood and Garth Brooks. Now, I'm knee-deep in it and see as many concerts as I can.

You're a fan of Garth Brooks, but are you also into Chris Gaines?
The first country concert I saw when I became an NBA player was Garth Brooks. I was trying to learn to play guitar. I was sitting front row and I'm not even listening to the music; I was watching his hand movements playing guitar. Afterwards, I go backstage and I was just looking at his hands, which were so calloused from playing guitar. I said, "So, if I'm going to get as good as you, my hands will have to look like that?" I went home, and I never touched a guitar again. Now, I'm on the writing side of country music instead of playing guitar.

I hear you're writing and recording music with Nashville artists.
I'm in the lab writing and producing country music. There's definitely going to be an album. That's the goal. I just don't know when.

I read you're friends with Morgan Wallen and had his music blasting through the Nuggets arena before Game 1 of the NBA Finals.
Yeah. That is my guy. My birthday is Sept. 14, and he plays a concert on my birthday in Toronto. I said I want to come onstage and sing one line of "'98 Braves." Maybe I'll sing a whole verse!

He was embroiled in some controversy when he was caught on video saying the n-word.
Wasn't no controversy for me. I heard about it. I didn't see the video. He is a friend of mine, and I don't know what happened. Obviously, it was a mistake. I think he learned from it; I think he knows better, and I don't know what was said and in what context, but I think he's an incredible human being who made a mistake.

Your story is incredible, too. You were on the street at 13. Do you think about how far you've come?
I actually don't think about it. My life is great now. I have wonderful kids and a wonderful family. I focus on the now, and hope and pray for the future. I don't look too far back. You can get lost doing that.

That being said, what advice would you give other kids in that situation?
I would never tell anybody to prove anyone else wrong. I used to be like that, and to me, it was very spiteful. Then I grew up and realized it wasn't even about proving them wrong; it was about proving myself right.

There are rumors that you're dating Shakira. Are they true?
She's an incredible human being and an incredible talent, but people just make stuff up. Just because we are friends, she lives in Miami, and her sons are basketball fans — that doesn't mean anybody's dating. Just because people hang out doesn't mean anybody's dating. But it gives everybody something to talk about, so y'all take it and run with it. She's very cool, and that's all I got!

Who are your heroes, and why?
My kids, man. I can't take them to school every single day. I can't have dinner with them every night. They sacrifice so much, and I've sacrificed so much to get to where I am today, so I can understand how hard that can be. Those kids are who I look up to. MARLOW STERN

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**